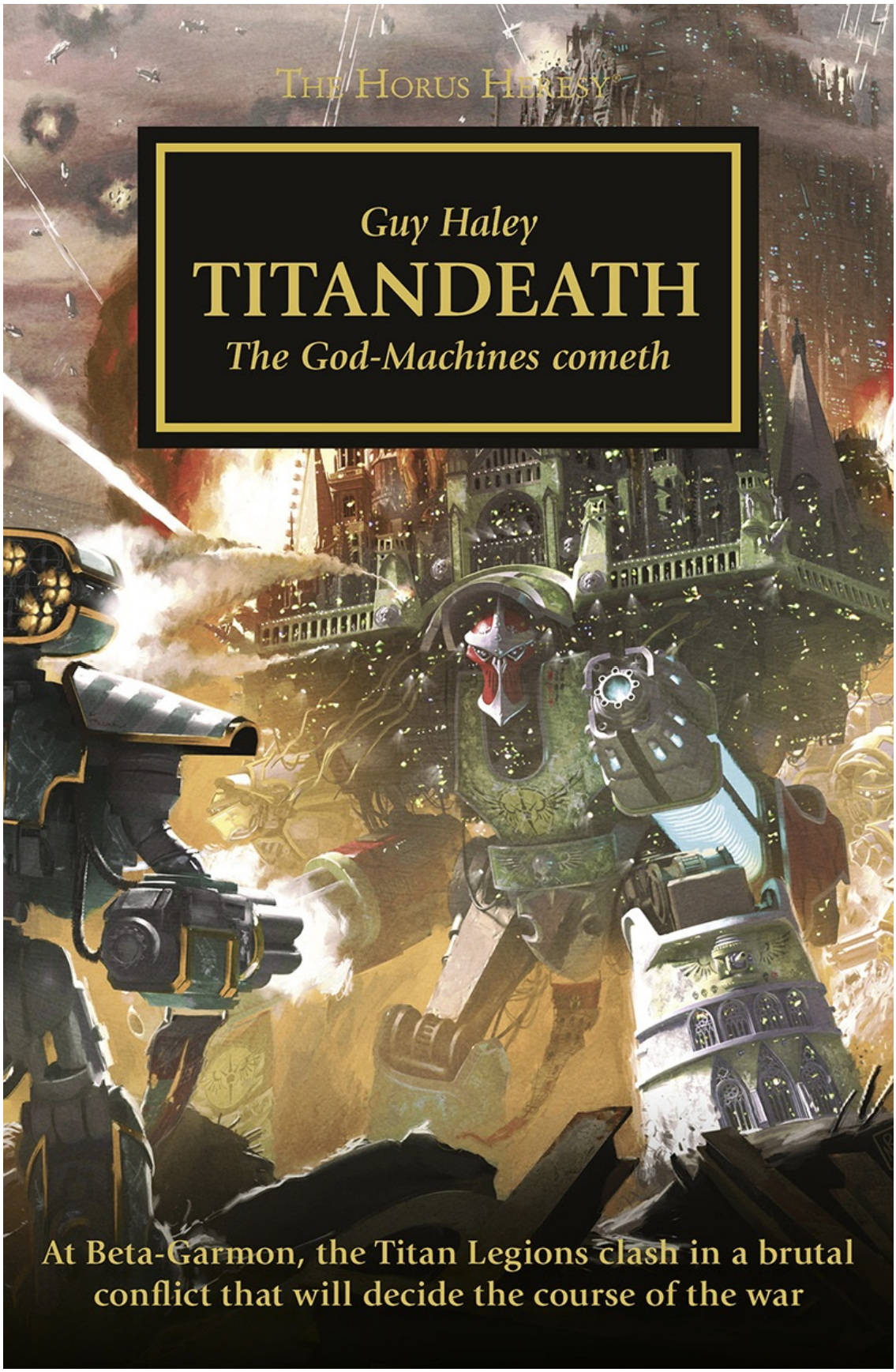
THE HORUS HERESY
Guy Haley
TITANDEATH
The God-Machines cometh
At Beta-Garmon, the Titan Legions clash in a brutal conflict that will decide the course of the war

VISIT…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THE HORUS HERESY®

Guy Haley

TITANDEATH

The God-Machines cometh

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THE HORUS HERESY

It is a time of legend.

The galaxy is in flames. The Emperor's glorious vision for humanity is in ruins. His favoured son, Horus, has turned from his father's light and embraced Chaos.

His armies, the mighty and redoubtable Space Marines, are locked in a brutal civil war. Once, these ultimate warriors fought side by side as brothers, protecting the galaxy and bringing mankind back into the Emperor's light. Now they are divided.

Some remain loyal to the Emperor, whilst others have sided with the Warmaster. Pre-eminent amongst them, the leaders of their thousands-strong Legions are the primarchs. Magnificent, superhuman beings, they are the crowning achievement of the Emperor's genetic science. Thrust into battle against one another, victory is uncertain for either side.

Worlds are burning. At Isstvan V, Horus dealt a vicious blow and three loyal Legions were all but destroyed. War was begun, a conflict that will engulf all mankind in fire. Treachery and betrayal have usurped honour and nobility. Assassins lurk in every shadow. Armies are gathering. All must choose a side or die.

Horus musters his armada, Terra itself the object of his wrath. Seated upon the Golden Throne, the Emperor waits for his wayward son to return. But his true enemy is Chaos, a primordial force that seeks to enslave mankind to its capricious whims.

The screams of the innocent, the pleas of the righteous resound to the cruel laughter of Dark Gods. Suffering and damnation await all should the Emperor fail and the war be lost.

The age of knowledge and enlightenment has ended.
The Age of Darkness has begun.

~ DRAMATIS PERSONAE ~

House Procon Vi, indentured knightly cohort to the Legio Solaria

Baravi Hanto, Baron

Dashiel, Hanto's servant

Legio Titanicus Solaria, 'The Imperial Hunters'

Mal-4 Chrysophane, Vox Omni Machina

Goten Mu Kassanius, Magos Principia Militaris, Archmagos Maxima Dominus Machina Dei

Mohana Mankata Vi, Domina Princeps Bellicosa Altus Xiliarkis, Great Mother of the Legio Solaria

Esha Ani Mohana, Princeps majoris of *Domine Ex Venari,* Second Maniple

Fenina Bol, Moderati bellatus of *Domine Ex Venari,* Second Maniple

Odani Jehan, Moderati bellatus of *Domine Ex Venari,* Second Maniple

Nepha Nen, Moderati bellatus of *Domine Ex Venari,* Second Maniple

Yeha Yeha, Moderati primus of *Domine Ex Venari,* Second Maniple

Mephani Ohana, Moderati oratorius of *Domine Ex Venari,* Second Maniple

Jephenir Jehan, Moderati steersman of *Domine Ex Venari,* Second Maniple

Omega-6, Magos plasmancer of *Domine Ex Venari,* Second Maniple

Soranti Daha, Princeps of *Velox Canis,* Second Maniple

Jehani Jehan, Princeps of *Cursor Ferro,* Second Maniple

Ophira Mendev, Moderati bellatus of *Cursor Ferro,* Second Maniple

Yulia Demonsany, Moderati bellatus of *Cursor Ferro,* Second Maniple

Natandi Fahl, Moderati steersman of *Cursor Ferro,* Second Maniple

Kalis Nen, Moderati oratorius of *Cursor Ferro,* Second Maniple
Perontius, Magos plasmancer of *Cursor Ferro,* Second Maniple
Toza Mindev, Princeps of *Procul Videns*, Second Maniple
Abhani Lus Mohana, Princeps of *Os Rubrum*, Second Maniple

Durana Fahl, Princeps majoris of *Steel Huntress*, Fourth Maniple
Akali Netra, Princeps majoris of *Odercarium,* Third Maniple
Kana Gallia, Princeps majoris of *Arcadian Might*, Sixth Maniple
Osha Mir, Princeps majoris, Eleventh/Thirteenth Maniple
Kansa Rit, Princeps majoris of *Broad Spear*, Tenth Maniple
Gophan Niri, Princeps of *Pilum Aurae*

Legio Titanicus Defensor 'Nova Guard'

Guillame Ferré, Princeps majoris, Third Maniple

Fasadian Heavy Infantry

Bollivar, Lord general, Fasadian high commander
Vannes, Colonel, Fasadian 14th
Etan Boq, Line gunner, Fasadian 86th
Suruq Reming, First watcher, Fasadian 4th

Blood Angels, Legiones Astartes IX Legion

Sanguinius, The Great Angel, primarch
Raldoron, First Captain
Azkaellon, Commander, Sanguinary Guard

White Scars, Legiones Astartes V Legion

Jaghatai Khan, The Warhawk of Chogoris, primarch

Legio Titanicus Vulpa, 'The Death Stalkers'

Terent Harrtek, Princeps majoris *Nuntio Dolores,* Maniple Seven
Bennif Durant, Shield warden, princeps of *Tenebris Vindictae,* Maniple Seven

MAKLAREN, Princeps of *Dust of Ages*, Maniple Seven
FEYDOON BAVIN, Princeps majoris, Maniple Nine
WESSELEK, Princeps majoris, Maniple Eighteen
VENEDIR ANTEKK, Princeps majoris, Maniple Four
PESHIN CLENN, Princeps, Maniple Five
BASSACK, Princeps
CASSON, Personal duluz to Terent Harrtek

Word Bearers, Legiones Astartes XVII Legion

DARK APOSTLE VORRJUK KRAAL, Word Bearers, attached to Legio Vulpa

Dark Mechanicum

ARDIM PROTOS, Magos, first disciple of Sota Nul

PROLOGUE

The Final Gambit

The spires of the *Phalanx* formed a cityscape as glorious as any once boasted by Terra's orbital plates, now all the more impressive for lack of suitable comparators. The plates were gone or changed as part of Terra's transformation to fortress world. Only one remained that rivalled the *Phalanx*, and its beauty was much curtailed, its towers cropped back to take heavy guns, and its adornments buried beneath walls of rockcrete.

Rogal Dorn had not set foot upon his immense flagship for months, being occupied with the fortification of the Throneworld, but the time had come to ascend into orbit if but for a while, for defence was giving way to attack. In the high orbits of mankind's home world and about its lonely moon a vast armada was taking shape, the blood red and bright white vessels of the Blood Angels and White Scars Space Marine Legions at its core.

Terra's battered orb gleamed before the oculus of Lord Dorn's personal observation deck, high upon a tower of the *Phalanx*'s spine. In a few precious places, the fragile signs of rebirth engineered by the Emperor clad Terra's tired greyness in a fuzz of green, and the blue mirrors of infant oceans painstakingly coaxed back into being reflected Sol's light.

The sun shone as it always had, and would for a billion more years. Man had little purchase upon its fiery orb, but the world that was Earth had suffered under mankind's dominion, and what little reparation had been made was at risk.

'My father's work is under threat as never before,' said Dorn to Malcador, the

sole other occupant of the chamber. ‘This is the moment the enemy dare the walls. My brother Horus is at Beta-Garmon. He is at the outermost gates of the city. The end is near.’

The deck was wide, circular, with an unbroken window the height of several men making up the majority of the wall. So clear and perfect was the glassite compromising it that if the bronzed plasteel dome was ignored, it seemed that the chamber was open to the naked void.

‘Your fondness for siege metaphors has never been more apt, I am afraid to say,’ said Malcador.

‘How you manage to maintain a light spirit in all this is your greatest gift,’ Dorn said. ‘We all do as we are, old man. I was a castellan long before I was a praetorian. Beta-Garmon is the gateway to Terra. If Horus takes the subsector,’ he paused, and drew in a deep, weary breath, ‘*when* Horus takes Beta-Garmon, the way will be wide open. The race reaches its conclusion. Guilliman comes from the east. The Lion lays waste to the enemy’s holdings. Horus must make his move soon, or he will fail. He knows this, and so he will rush. Then he will make mistakes.’

‘If only he could be stopped before he reaches Terra,’ said Malcador.

Dorn looked down at the Sigillite.

‘We both know that he will come here,’ said Dorn. ‘The question is when. The task is not to stop him, but to slow him. We can weaken him at Beta-Garmon. If he can be brought to a halt before the walls of the palace, my brother will come, and trap him.’ Dorn gestured out at the cancerous smear of the Imperial Palace, clinging to the highest mountains of the world. ‘Horus’ forces are as battered as ours. Though greater in number, they abandon discipline for the barbarism of their new gods. They fragment. Sanguinius says Roboute’s Legion remains close to full strength, and his other forces are numberless. Not even Horus can resist the Ultramarines. His grip on my traitorous brothers’ egos will last only so long. If Horus is delayed, then he will lose, even if he breaches the walls of the palace itself. The calculation is then what damage will be done, and what can be prevented.

‘We will win. I will not consider the possibility of defeat. It is the manner of victory we achieve that troubles me.’ He walked closer to the oculus, turning away from Terra to the armada of ships gathering around Luna. ‘Sanguinius and the Khan are ready to depart. The Great Muster is under way at Beta-Garmon. Thousands of ships, hundreds of regiments, dozens of Titan Legios. Forces loyal to my father gather from all over the Imperium. They will ensure that Beta-

Garmon is Horus' final victory.'

Malcador walked to the primarch's side, his staff tapping quietly on the granite floor.

'We will pay a heavy price for this action,' he said. 'We will lose many resources in challenging Lupercal, and it is regrettable that the cluster will be ruined in the process. The number of Titan Legios present there alone guarantee devastation to every world. The realm of Beta-Garmon has proven most useful to the Emperor, these last centuries.'

'Every planet lost is a despicable shame, but this is total war,' said Dorn. 'Beta-Garmon sits upon a confluence of stable warp routes. A blessing for five thousand years, they are a curse to those worlds now. They offer the fastest route to Terra. The Garmon Cluster is the key to victory to whoever holds it. It is already lost to us, but in attacking it Horus has no room left for manoeuvre. He has no space to outwit us. We know where he is. We know what he is doing. His options are limited, so his genius for strategy is a lesser advantage. He must come through Beta-Garmon. If we can hold the core system, retake Nyrcon City perhaps, the front will be stabilised, not forever, but the longer the better. Sanguinius and the Khan must buy Roboute time. I would gladly sacrifice many more than the worlds of the Garmon Cluster for that. Many, many more.'

He looked to the gathering fleet.

'The armies of the Warmaster attack the Garmon Cluster with unmatched fury. He pushes at us.' Dorn's eyes narrowed.

'It is time the Imperium pushed back.'

PART ONE

INTO THE FIRE

ONE

The First Huntress

There was wind upon her skin.

The breeze was a memory, but it felt real all the same. Life in the tank blurred the past into the present. What was and what had been existed in the same moment for her. Her life had become one long book to be browsed at will, so it did not seem so very strange to smell the animal scents of the mega-herds on the breeze, even though for over a century all she had smelled, tasted and felt was blood-warm amnion. At one and the same time Mohana Mankata Vi was entrapped in the skull of *Luxor Invictoria,* and she was astride her mount, Hamaj, and she was a sleeping child. She was telling the story of the day the Legio was born to a class of her daughters on Tigris. She was young. She was old.

Memory bled into dream when Mohana Mankata Vi slept. In what lesser minds regarded as the present, her naked body twitched feebly in the fluid that gave her life, her arms brushing against the network of feeder tubes, data tethers and synaptic linkage cables cocooning her.

She did not feel them. She did not see the tiny confines of her bubble world. Her body was imprisoned, but her spirit roamed free.

The wind carried fertile dust off the steppes, depositing it over the forest lands of House Vi. As the wind nourished the trees, so it blew vigour into Mohana Mankata Vi's soul.

Sunlight blazed through hazy air, and she remembered other sensations long

denied her. The trees shushed and roared as the breeze blew gently then strong. The flavour of mare's milk lingered in her mouth. It was spring weather, hot and cold at once; the sun was warm on her face even as the raw iron of cold air burned her lungs. She panted lightly. Her face tingled, her body thrilling from her ride to the top of the bluff. Her fingers were numb about the leather of the reins, though she would never let them go. Her grip was too practised for that.

All these details were pin sharp, perfect beyond a human being's ability to note them in the moment, dredged up to be relived from the patterning of her organic engrams and rebuilt by her Titan's immense cogitators.

Hamaj pawed the bluff's flat top impatiently. His metal shoes drew sparks from the rock. His blue-black coat rippled with muscle. The banner of his mane whipped around Mohana's arms, soft yet coarse. He could already smell steam and fire on the racing air. He wished to join the chase.

The memory was important, and she had relived it many times, for this was the day the Legio was made; not the moment the great adamantium bones of the Titans were cast, or when the reactor of the first machine exploded into life, but another day, a day as significant as the forging of the machines of war. A Titan was metal, but it was also flesh and blood.

This was an instance of the flesh.

This was the day the hunters were chosen.

In her years of youthful incarnation Mohana's vision had been renowned among the women of Procon. She was, they said, a natural choice to join the priestesses of the huntress godess Pahkmetris. Had things been different, she might indeed have gone to the temple, and risen to the position of high priestess as had many first-born women of her house. But those times were in the past, before the outland men came from the stars and told her people the gods were nonsense, first suggesting they be abandoned, then commanding it be so.

The Imperial Truth was the price and blessing of compliance, and although the civil war that came decades afterwards had proved the Emperor's creed to be a story like all the other stories, at the time it had been compelling. Under the Emperor's truth the old ways died so fast that Mohana's faith would certainly have perished completely, were it not for other men with another story, and another god.

After the rogue traders had marked the world of Procon for compliance, the iterators arrived to speak their honeyed words. Then came the priests of Mars.

The lies of men flow so freely from their lips they forget they are not speaking the truth. After the iterators denied the existence of the divine, the priests in red

told them of a deity of mechanisms and knowledge. In the space of five years there were two delegations with one ostensible master, delivering two divergent narratives. Wonder became cynicism. Faced with this contradiction, and the covetous way the men who made it eyed her home, Mohana Mankata Vi vowed not to forget Pahkmetris, no matter what the iterators or the tech-priests said.

The day she sat upon the bluff – the day the Legio was born – was the day the houses of Procon competed for the favour of the god of machines. She could not take part in the chase herself. The path of the women of Procon was laid differently to that of the men. She could, however, watch.

From her vantage Mohana Mankata Vi had a fine view over the final stretch: a long tongue of late summer grass cut into the forest, dividing one line of hills from another and marking the borderland where the trees' dominion gave way to that of the steppe. The finishing post was on the plains a few miles further on. The Knights would come that way, she was sure.

She was not the only huntress to have guessed so. Branches rattled at the tree line fifty metres away. A second horsewoman broke from the forest and urged her mount up to the summit of the ridge, expertly guiding the horse around clefts and traps of rock.

Galiana Atum came to a breathless halt at Mohana Mankata Vi's side. The two were cousins of distant degree, linked by blood ties woven over a thousand years of intrigue. They were not friends. Though they were related, Galiana's house was not Mohana's house. Galiana's father was a duke, Mohana's was the king, and there was rivalry between the daughters as there was between the fathers.

'Any sign of them yet?' Galiana said. Rarely did they bother with formal modes of address. Both were adepts of the huntress. The ways of the temple mattered more than lordly custom.

Mohana Mankata Vi gave a barely perceptible nod. She pointed to the woods.

Galiana frowned and shaded her eyes. 'I see nothing.'

'Then you are blind,' said Mohana. 'Watch.'

The movement of the trees became perceptible to both of them. Branches whipped back and forth, cracking loudly, perturbed by the passage of something large through the forest. A tree crashed down in a thrash of shattering wood. A cloud of birds and leaves burst upwards, chased out by a roil of smoke that belched from the canopy and blew on the wind towards the bluff. The damp, hot smell of steam washed over them. The horses' nostrils flared. Hamaj tossed his great head and whickered. The line of destruction was heading for the open land, and gathering speed.

‘Is that…?’ began Galiana.

‘Yes,’ said Mohana. ‘They are here.’

The trees at the edge of the tongue of grass parted in an explosion of splinters. A lumbering bipedal machine burst out, revealing itself as an ancient, mechanised warsuit five times the height of a man. It was a Knight, a relic from the long-ago years of settlement, carefully maintained down the centuries and piloted by the scions of Procon’s noble houses. The Knights were the protectors of Procon, and the reason the world had weathered the horrors of Old Night when so many others had perished.

The Knight’s left hand was a giant, hydraulic fist that swatted away the last branches clawing at its chest. The right arm bore a lance mount filled by a simple shaft of metal without the explosive tip it would carry into war.

Against the weapon’s conical guard rested the day’s favour, a tilting hoop large enough for a warsuit lance to snag from a target hook. It was made of brass and toothed like a cog. Whoever carried it to the finishing post would win the greatest concessions from the machine priests in the coming negotiations.

Galiana stood in her stirrups and let out a cry of delight. Brightly painted armour proclaimed the heritage of its rider. The Knight bore the badge of House Atum – her house. The personal heraldry of her brother Agali was emblazoned on its right shoulder guard.

‘He has it!’

Mohana Mankata Vi scowled at her. ‘The day is not done yet.’

The engines on the machine’s back chuffed with effort. Exhaust stacks vented clouds of white steam and alcohol vapour. The Knight accelerated into a laborious run. Pistons hissing, engine roaring, feet thumping dully into hard turf, it headed down the bight of grassland out towards the open plain, where the forest drew back in surrender to the fields of gold, and the wide open spaces of the world began. The land dropped sharply not far beyond.

Agali’s Knight got some way, far enough for Mohana to grow concerned House Vi would lose the contest, until whistles hooted from both sides of the strip of grassland. Two more Knights erupted from the forest, one bearing a pair of massive claws, the other a broadsword and a rebated lance.

Both wore black and silver plate, and the blue eagle badges of House Vi. The claw-armed Knight was that of Mohana’s uncle Vakrian, the lancer her brother Shunji.

Mohana’s uncle smashed into the side of Agali’s machine in a high tackle. The clamour of metal striking metal crashed over the landscape, scaring up flocks of

avians from all over the forest. The impact damaged both Knights. The shoulder guard of Vakrian's machine ripped off, showering splinters of metal and paint over the ground. Half of the shoulder plate folded itself around Agali's Knight's arm and was dragged off, tangling Agali's movements. Vakrian peeled away on an unsteady arc, steam whistling from a burst leg piston. Agali's Knight stumbled, ran on a few paces before tripping on a broken locomotor shaft dangling from its hip. It fell hard, tearing up a long stripe of turf and exposing the dark soil beneath. His lance bent and sheared off. The cog trophy bounced free. Shunji deftly speared it and raced on, the prize glinting from the base of his upheld lance.

Now it was Mohana Mankata Vi's turn to grin.

'Oh no,' said Galiana. 'He dropped it!'

'My uncle Vakrian dropped *him*,' said Mohana. 'No one will catch my brother now. He is the finest Knight in the realm.'

More and more Knights were emerging from the woods. Some came through the gap Agali had forged, others attempted their own ambushes, but few could pilot a Knight as well as Shunji. His Knight leapt as deftly as an athlete of flesh and blood around the swiping attempts to grab him. Suddenly there were a score of the machines on the grassland, jostling and fighting with each other. At the back of the line a sprinting Knight plunged its foot into a hidden bog, and down he went in catastrophic impact. Bits of machine flew everywhere. The head came free and bounced down the meadow like a hurled ball. The pilot floundered out into the mud moments before the Knight's fuel tank exploded, sending a blue ball of fire woofing skywards.

Hunch-backed armour suits loped across the prairie to join the stream of metal pounding after Shunji. The running of the Knights trembled the ground, a persistent tremor like the hoofbeats of the wild herds during migration time. It was rare to see so many of the nobility in the field at once. The engine-smiths of every hold had laboured for weeks to prepare the ancient machines for this event. Their pride was at stake. They wished to show their craft was good. They wanted to demonstrate they were worthy. They had as much to prove, if not more, than the Knights they served.

Glory would go to the victorious house, but the Mechanicum's knowledge would go to its smiths.

Galiana's face was a picture of dismay. Her brother's war engine heaved up onto one knee but could not rise. Wood alcohol running from a rupture in the fuel tank ignited on the scalding boiler. The Knight clanged back down. The

salvator hatch blew off, and Galiana's brother threw himself free. His helm was half over his eyes, plumes sodden from the leaking engine. He looked ridiculous and Mohana laughed. Her brother Shunji had outpaced his pursuers and he was almost at the open prairie.

'I told you. I told you!' said Mohana Mankata Vi gleefully. She let out a long, wild ululation and urged her horse off the bluff towards the chase. Hamaj plunged fearlessly down the steep scarp, his legs splayed to brake himself, hooves scraping up showers of stones. Then they were off the slope, leaving Galiana blinking at girl and horse's shared audacity as they raced away into the trees.

Hamaj careered nimbly around the trunks without direction from his mistress. An exhilarating few moments later, they were out onto the grass. Hamaj lengthened his stride and held his head up as if he wished to show the galaxy what he could do. The world flew by Mohana. The trees were a dark green streak, the grass a golden ribbon.

Mohana Mankata Vi laughed. Pollen rose in clouds around her. Hamaj shot past the slumped wreckage of Agali's Knight and Agali stood and shouted something after her as she thundered past. She did not hear, but leaned forward, urging Hamaj towards the Knights running ahead.

The Knights were fast, but Hamaj was faster. His legs blurred as he galloped into the midst of their mechanical violence. Always, Hamaj was without fear. The great beasts of the plains did not daunt him, nor did the Knights of steel.

Mohana rode between the sons and fathers of the houses as their machines shoved at each other. Metal fists hit plangent blows. Steam whistles of many pitches shrilled. A lesser mount would have bolted, but not Hamaj. He tossed his head and ran faster towards the leading edge of the Knightly pack, where Mohana's brother Shunji set the pace.

Mohana raced past a Knight as it tripped and fell, its heels curling over its back so high it came close to completing an awkward roll. Shouts from broken cockpits and downed Knights pursued her, challenging her, demanding she turn back.

She laughed at them all.

Shunji's Knight was ahead, close enough now she could see the flex of his warsuit's mechanical claw-toes as they lifted from the ground. Close enough to smell the hot oil and the rich scent of burning alcohol, and to see the pistons gleam as they slid in and out of greased sleeves.

She drew level with her brother. He must have seen her, for his Knight let out a

long, hooting war call through its bank of whistles. Hamaj flicked his mighty head in reply. Mohana smiled so wide her face hurt. It was a moment of perfect triumph, her house ascendant, brother and sister side by side, that seemed to last an eternity. It did every time she recalled it. In truth it was fleeting, and cruelly snatched away.

The flanged head of a steam harpoon punched through the chest piece of Shunji's Knight with a sound like a smith's hammer hitting a bell. Steam geysered in every direction from severed feed pipes. The suit lost power instantly and sagged on depressurising pistons. Heavy feet dragged at the ground. The enemies of House Vi were not yet done. Before Shunji's Knight completed its fall forwards, the cable attached to the harpoon twanged taut.

Shunji's Knight was yanked backwards off its feet. The effect on the harpooner was as devastating as it was on Shunji's machine. The harpooner's arm was wrenched free, unbalancing the warsuit, and the Knight pitched face forward into the dirt. Shunji's Knight was ripped apart.

Mohana ducked a piece of flying armour plate that would have decapitated her. Jets of scalding vapour blasted from both wrecked machines, showers of hot water and oil raining all around.

The glorious run was over. Mohana hauled Hamaj to a sudden halt. Knights were gaining on her fallen brother. In their eagerness for the prize, two more collided and tripped over the wreckage of Shunji's attacker. One flipped over the smoking ruin; the other bounced off and staggered into the path of a third charging war machine. The clash of tonnes of metal hitting metal thundered over the world.

Whistles shrieked. The Knights slowed, ponderous heads seeking out the fallen prize with primitive autosenses.

Mohana saw it first. It bounced over the short grass like a live thing fleeing a predator. She watched it hit a lump in the ground and take off, toothed edges flashing in the sun.

Before she knew what she was doing, she set Hamaj into motion. The stallion lunged towards the prize. The cog was rolling along the ground, leaning over, about to come to a circling stop.

Mohana swung low off her saddle. Rushes whipped her face. She reached out and grabbed the cog. It was almost too heavy for her to pull up, so she twisted, sending Hamaj veering sharply to the right, and used his momentum to sling herself back up into her seat.

She hung the cog from her saddle pommel and leaned into the wind.

‘Fly, Hamaj, fly!’ she breathed into the horse’s ear.

Her steed opened up his stride. Behind her, outraged war machines cried shrieks of steam.

The ground shook behind her. Ahead the sky drew near, a false horizon where the land dropped to the plains proper. She was at it in moments, and heading down the long, gentle slope into the sea of grass. A kilometre out from the slope, a vast geometric design had been carved from the vegetation, and the ground beneath fired as hard as clay. At the design’s centre, in the shadow of a vast metal voidship, was a golden arch large enough to accommodate a Knight, and beyond that a dais bearing the king and his court.

A war machine came jogging after her. It approached the ridge too fast, lost its footing and tripped. It tumbled head over heels down the slope, scattering components and armour plates. Hamaj dodged a bounding lump of wreckage. The horse was faster than the machines, but they were tireless and he was not. She urged him on, using the advantage his four sure feet gave on the uneven ground while they had it.

She was winning. She was not supposed to.

The bottom of the declivity came soon. The ground levelled out into a series of gentle, swelling rises that rolled on into infinity. She pounded up and down each of them, the giant ship always in sight. They knew of voidcraft on Procon, but rarely saw them. Occasionally, the Knights of the houses would have to fight off an invasion, or an itinerant merchant might set down on their world to sell wondrous goods, but none of those other craft, whether human or xenos, could compare to the majesty of the ships of the Mechanicum of Mars.

The craft was bigger than House Vi’s fortress, a hundred metres high, its sloping sides emblazoned with the off-worlders’ strange heraldry. Most prominent of all was the divided skull they bore on all their gear and clothing, stamped into the panels on all sides of the ship. Its machine smell was acrid, far less welcoming than the warm scent of the steam engines that powered the Knights. And yet she raced for it with total abandon. She had crossed a line. There was nothing else she could do but see her actions through to the end.

The rattling-pounding of Knight footfalls drew closer behind her, too late. She flew under the arch and drew up her horse before the dais, in front of the great ship.

On the loftiest throne sat her father, King Rahajanan. Seated next to him in a metal chair made to the exact size and weight as the king’s was the representative of the machine priests. Her father was unreadable to most, but she

recognised the signs of fury in his eyes. The priest's face was hidden by his cowl. Mohana had an impression of metal and old flesh in the shadows. Long, banded tentacles, like snakes, danced around his back. She suspected he looked monstrous under his hood, like one of the iron men from the old stories, whose rampage had cast down the realms of the ancients. The three highest lords of Procon sat on the level below the king. They were the heads of the three major houses, lesser only than House Vi itself. A crowd of womenfolk and minor male courtiers were seated in a box on the lowest tier. Around the Mechanicum representative were a group of outlandish men-machines, constructed rather than born, like a collection of badly judged statues.

Mohana lifted up the heavy cog in both hands and showed it to them all.

'In the name of House Vi, I claim the patronage of the Mechanicum of Mars, and the favour of the forge world of Tigris.'

She threw the cog down onto the bare, baked earth. She might as well have dropped a bomb.

Her father's position was compromised. He could not rebuke her, because he would throw the whole contest into doubt, but if he backed her actions, he disrespected his dukes. Either way, the honour of House Vi was at stake. His cold stare promised terrible punishment. The royal court was aghast. They goggled in disbelief and muttered behind their hands.

The blank metal and flesh visages of the Mechanicum delegation could not be more different to those of the court of Procon. Blends of machine and man observed her clinically. Lights blinked in place of eyes. Lines of text streamed over glass displays set into chests.

'Interesting,' said the representative.

The king looked to his guest, unwilling to make the first move.

'This contest is void,' said the duke of House Kandaj. 'This was to be a display of the skill of the Knights, not of horsemanship!'

'The Knights' skill was lacking. The huntress has won,' said Mohana. She could say nothing else. She was terrified. She should not have run with the Knights. Her split-second decision to take up the prize would cost her life.

The dismay of the court grew. Knights were coming to a stop around the arch, steam roaring from overheated engines. Cockpit hatches slammed back. Warriors tore the interface cables of their thrones from their necks to stand proud in their cockpits, and condemn her from on high.

'My daughter shows great courage, and resourcefulness,' said the king. 'She has shown us all up!' He laughed indulgently, though any that knew him well

would have seen his humour for a lie.

No one else laughed. A heavy silence fell, subduing even the wind.

Strange machine chimes and the rattling of mechanisms sounded from one of the Mechanicum delegation. A disturbing twittering, similar to but horribly unlike that of birds, passed between several of them.

The representative was the first to speak human words. ‘I say she has taken the token, and she has won,’ he said. ‘I proclaim House Vi victorious.’

From their expressions, the nobility had expected the Mechanicum to cry foul, but the machine priests did not seem in the least perturbed.

Mohana was a princess. She was well versed in statecraft, trained for the time she would enter the third era of life when her children were grown and she become barren. Old women spent their time smoothing and shaping the planet’s byzantine politics to suit their houses, never openly, always behind closed doors.

She saw now what she had done. If the representative deemed the competition fairly won, it would set all the other houses against House Vi. Her house would be the first to gain the Mechanicum’s promised knowledge, and have the honour of fighting the war in the stars, but they would be left at the mercy of the other houses for generations. She had made her family reliant on the Mechanicum for protection.

But her father was no fool either. A sly expression entered King Rahajanan’s eyes.

A second, worse realisation hit her. She saw, in that moment, in that look on her father’s face, that she had doomed herself forever for the sake of a moment of pride.

King Rahajanan opened his mouth to speak.

<Great Mother,> boomed an emotionless machine voice. <It is time to awaken.>

TWO

Vox Omni Machina

While in transit *Luxor Invictoria*'s head was kept separate from his body in a soaring *naoz*. The removal to the chapel was done not for respect for the Warlord Titan, but for the machine's permanent occupant, *Luxor Invictoria*'s princeps and his human soul, Domina Princeps Bellicosa Altus Xiliarkis Mohana Mankata Vi, the Great Mother of the Legio Solaria – or the Imperial Hunters, as the order was called in the vulgar tongue.

Luxor Invictoria's head was altar, holy relic and war machine in one. His glowering face, forged in the likeness of a great helm, stared down from a cradle that dominated the naoz's apse. His emerald glassite eyes took the place of stained glass windows. His red, angular visor was a part of the chapel's architecture. His soul was the conduit for the divine. Through him, the Machine-God was immanent.

Princeps Majoris Esha Ani Mohana could practically taste the holy oil of the deity's blood.

A dozen cyber constructs hovered over *Luxor Invictoria*'s domed skull. Four cyber cherubs supported a thick cloth canopy bearing the mottos of the Legio and the roll of its victories. Less baroque creations moved in regular, precise patterns over the head, jetting polish and lubricants onto the gleaming metal. A servo skull fashioned from the remains of one of the Legio's fallen heroes moved around the armour plates, the large pair of polishing discs mounted in place of its jaw buffing constantly. A second, equipped similarly, cleaned and

polished the bronze panel trim in ceaseless rounds. Billows of incense puffed from auto censers. Fragrant lubricants steamed in wide bowls. A choir of servitor torsos mounted in high galleries sang hymns praising the glory of the machine. Devices hummed. Gas exchange pipes hissed. Bundled cables swayed in draughts vented from the mouths of atmosphere cycling friezes. The chorus was that of machines at work, but humanity was present there also. Red robed enginseers worked discreetly behind fretwork screening off cloisters full of banks of blinking lights. There was a sense of anticipation, as if something miraculous was about to happen, as profound and calming as the last moment before sleep.

All was peace. Neither the turmoil of the warp buffeting the *Tantamon* nor Horus' war impinged upon the sanctity of the naoz. Only the Warlord Titan's head and its revered mistress mattered there. The Machine-God commanded it.

'*Invictoria* cannot begrudge having his head removed, if it makes the Great Mother sleep better,' said Princeps Soranti Daha. She made to joke, as was her way. Her tongue was as swift as her Warhound Titan, always eager, but her words came out as a whisper, and she cringed slightly as they echoed off the marble and iron facings of the temple.

Six of them stood on the footway that rose from the naoz floor, Esha Ani Mohana and her subordinate princeps of the Imperial Hunters Second Maniple. Unconsciously they took the position their machines did when they walked: Esha at the front; her second, Jehani Jehan to her right; and then the rest, Toza Mindev, Soranti Daha and Abhani Lus Mohana, arrayed either side in wings that curved inwards, so that Daha and Abhani Lus were closest to the granite balustrade. Princeps Majoris Durana Fahl of Fourth Maniple was also present, slightly apart from the others, although she had fought with Second for three years now.

The women were of similar physical appearance, olive-skinned, dark-eyed, all but Lus black-haired. Lus' reddish braids set her apart a touch from the others, but only so much as sisters look a little different. They were a family. All had the same straight nose, the same narrow face bearing the same grave expression. They were handsome women rather than pretty. Their similarity was accentuated by the dress uniforms they wore of dark green, heavy cloth with knee boots and tall, stiff collars. Esha and Durana Fahl's collars were red and decorated with rank pins cast in the shape of Reaver Titans' feet; the rest wore black displaying the splay-footed imprints of Warhound scout engines. Hung about their necks were bronze ceremonial gorgets stamped with the Imperial aquila superimposed

on the machina opus of Mars. They guarded these vestigial pieces of armour carefully. They were the sign of their faith with Terra, and the Fabricator General in exile.

The footway raised the women up in height so that they might stand level with the eyes of the dormant machine. Esha's Reaver Titan *Domine Ex Venari* was not so mighty as *Luxor Invictoria*, but they were forge siblings nevertheless, called forth from the same lakes of molten metal on Tigris, and Esha Ani Mohana felt a powerful kinship with the god-machine.

Although it was somnolent, and bodiless, the head of *Luxor Invictoria* radiated potency. All Titans had a sense of danger, even when shut down, the same way a sleeping predator of flesh and blood would were it magnified ten thousand times – and there were no killers of any kind, flesh or steel, greater than an Imperial Battle Titan.

The fragment of *Domine Ex Venari*'s soul that Esha carried in her heart recognised *Luxor Invictoria*'s superiority, and urged her to kneel before the head. All the others of Second Maniple would feel the same. Their machines were lords of war, but they stood in the presence of the king.

Not one of them did kneel. The six of them were sister-bonded princeps. They knew full well what it was to bridge the worlds of machine and man. Although *Luxor Invictoria'*s eyes gazed unblinking and imperious upon them, and the machine-spirit's might hummed around them, they were not cowed. A Titan's soul was a being to be worshipped as the scriptures of Mars insisted, but it was also something to be dominated. One should never show weakness before a god-machine, no matter how imposing. A princeps could have no fear of any Titan. To show fear risked losing their own engine's respect. A loss of respect equalled a loss of control, and a princeps with no control was no princeps at all.

So they stared the head down. Confidence born from commanding its brethren gave them the will required.

Mohana Mankata Vi was another matter. She they did fear, and love. If she were stood before them, outside the head and the amniotic tank she dwelled permanently within, they would not have been able to meet her eyes.

'One hundred and twenty-four years ago she entered the cockpit for the final time, never again to leave. Imagine that,' said Toza Mindev in awe.

'Imagine,' said Esha. 'She is the first of the Legio. She was there the day the first engine walked, and the day its colours were granted. She has served in our ranks since the beginning, and commanded for fifteen decades. This is why we come to pay our respects.'

‘She is your mother,’ said Mindev breathily. She looked to her leader adoringly. ‘You are blessed.’

‘She is far more than that,’ said Esha.

In battle Mohana Mankata Vi’s presence filled the comms waves of their Legio, linking them all so closely they could feel her breath on their necks. After so long in transit, they felt the need to be near to the Great Mother again, and being outside the disconnected head of Vi’s command Titan was the closest most of them would get to her in person, ever.

Mohana Mankata Vi awed them where the machines did not.

Abhani Lus knelt and marked the sign of the holy cog over her forehead.

‘Mohana Mankata Vi, watch over us. Use us well in the coming war,’ she whispered. ‘You are most praised, most exalted, bonded to the Machine-God by your mind, body and soul. Watch over your Legio, Great Mother. Bring us victory.’

‘She can’t hear you,’ said Soranti Daha. Again, she meant her words to tease, but they came out unbelieving, and quiet.

‘You don’t mean that,’ said Lus. She rose and brushed at her knees, although the naoz was as clean as it could possibly be. ‘She can feel our presence. We are all her daughters. She knows we are here.’

‘Maybe she knows *you* are here,’ said Mindev. ‘Granddaughter, mother and daughter. A trinity worthy of the Omnissiah!’

‘Silence,’ said Esha crossly. Mindev was devout, and her constant reciting of the Mohana line irked her. ‘You demean yourself with your envy. We are all daughters of equal worth to her, myself and Abhani Lus Mohana included. Not one of us is more important to the Great Mother than the others.’

They stood to attention in silence. The hum and whirr of machine life took the place of human noises.

The low ring of a bronze bell reverberated around the naoz. The spell broke. Esha turned around on her heels as the second chime sang.

‘Your holiness,’ she said, and inclined her head in respect.

The others turned at her words, and seeing who approached, knelt.

‘We offer our greeting and respect to you, Magos Mal-Four Chrysophane, deimechanic, who is Vox Omni Machina, talker to machines, and keeper of the secrets of the interface,’ said Esha.

Chrysophane walked tall on three stilt legs. Their length lifted him high over the heads of the women and the six *neokora* acolytes walking behind him. Though he lurched unsteadily on his tripodal feet, he moved very quietly;

indeed, all his motions and his manner were quiet and thoughtful, for his role was communicator with the machine-spirits. He was a direct auto-oracle, a speaker with and for the machines. As each machine-spirit was a fragment of the Machine-God, his work was so holy it demanded he have the greatest respect for the devices he joined with and make no unnecessary noise in case he miss the subtleties of their speech. The clamour of industry was a holy song to their god, but he went on quiet, rubberised feet. His was a difficult but crucial role.

The Vox Omni Machina was hunched, with heavy diagnostic augmetic systems integrated directly into his spine. His red and white robes – the colours of the forge world of Tigris – were split along the back so the artfulness of the flesh machine bond and the blessed extent of his bionics were on display for all to see. Aged skin stretched under bonding pincers. Polished bone showed in his open back, enmeshed with wires. His head, by contrast, was wholly obscured by his hood. Though Esha had known Mal-4 Chrysophane for decades, she had seen his face uncovered only a handful of times. Beneath the crimson and cream he retained human ears and scalp, and hair which had turned from brown to grey and thinned over the course of their association, but his face was covered completely by a steel mask. Round green lenses had replaced his eyes, and a smooth rebreather unit his mouth and nose.

Esha knelt and held out her hand for his blessing. A mechadendrite tipped with an interface plug snaked down and stroked her upturned palm.

'May he who is three yet one bless and keep you in knowledge, Princeps Majoris Esha Ani Mohana.' Chrysophane's legs hissed and shortened, bringing him down to a more human level. Further mechadendrites moved from beneath his robes, until he was surrounded by a dancing crowd of metal tentacles. They caressed the hands of the princeps as he blessed them all in order of seniority.

As maniple majoris, Esha was permitted to rise first. She did, and looked into the green glass eyes of the Vox Omni Machina.

'You have come to awaken the Great Mother?'

'Your mother wakes already, mistress Esha Ani Mohana.' Chrysophane's voice was human sounding, but synthesised, and it rasped on the sibilants. 'The fleet has made good speed through the immaterium. Battle calls us. Great Mother Mohana Mankata Vi will be brought to full functionality today so she may lead Legio Solaria once more.'

'You have begun already?' said Esha. She looked back at the Titan head. 'Rousing her takes longer every time.'

'A precaution, huntress,' said the priest. 'She is old. It is best all should be done

correctly, according to the precepts of scripture and manual, than to risk one so honoured as the Great Mother through haste.'

Esha gave him a querying look. 'Taking that into account, I calculate not enough time has passed for us to have reached the core worlds of the Garmon Cluster, even given a fair warp current. We are not due to leave the warp for another four days. Has her condition deteriorated?' Despite her pledge to remain distant, she asked the question with a daughter's concern, not as an officer of the Legio.

'We arrive soon at Theta-Garmon,' said Chrysophane.

'When?' asked Esha in surprise.

'One day, perhaps two.'

'But we were bound for Beta-Garmon itself, at the centre of the subsector. The capital system! Why have we changed heading?'

'New orders,' said the Vox Omni Machina. He sounded regretful. 'You have not been informed?'

'No,' she said. 'I have not.'

'For that I apologise.'

'You can tell me now, your holiness. Surely.'

Chrysophane gestured in agreement, a strange tentacular, mechanical shrug. 'We have been diverted to the shipyards of Theta-Garmon Five. A major attack is under way. There is much glory to the machine in the shipyards and hydrogen harvesters that ring the world. These works cannot be sullied by those of the False Mechanicum.'

'Only the Great Mother has the authority to change the target, yet she sleeps,' said Esha. 'Why was she not consulted? What is Magos Principia Militaris Goten Mu Kassanius doing?'

'In the absence of a Grand Master's guidance, it is usual for the Magos Principia of a Legio to interpret commands and decide upon the best course of action,' he said smoothly. 'As well you know, princeps majoris. The orders came from Terra. They are the words of Lord Dorn himself.'

'We are a Legio Titanica of the Mechanicum. We are not beholden to a distant primarch's whim.'

Chrysophane's disturbingly false voice smiled as he spoke. 'No longer the Mechanicum. We have entered a new iteration. We are the Adeptus Mechanicus, and the orders sent to us are ratified for all forge worlds by the psy-stamp of Zagreus Kane, true Fabricator General, lord of the Senatorum Imperialis of Terra and ruler in exile of most holy Mars, so if you prefer, our orders come from the

highest possible authority. If you have any concerns, raise them with the Magos Principia Militaris. I am sure he will hear you out, honoured daughter of the Great Mother.'

'That I shall,' she said.

'Now, please, I beg you. I have work to attend to. You must depart.' Chrysophane gestured politely but firmly towards the rear of the chapel.

The twin doors opened and a solemn procession of chanting priests filed into the naoz. All had their heads cowled over with halved red and cream robes. Though the colours of Tigris remained as they had for centuries, new sigils and devices spoke of the change of regime rippling throughout the Martian empire.

'I don't like it,' said Jehani quietly to Esha. 'Mars has given up too much for a seat at the Terrans' table.'

Esha silenced her deputy with a look, before returning her gaze to the Vox Omni Machina. 'You should have awoken the Great Mother,' she said to Chrysophane. 'It was her choice to make, not the priesthood's. She is Bellatrix Altus. The Legio is her command.'

'She decides the war, whereas we should only look to the spiritual and physical needs of our engines?' said Chrysophane, somewhat patronisingly. 'If only the Machine-God had seen to set the mechanisms of the Machina Cosma to a lower complexity grade, but life is not so simple. Would you have the Legio defy the lord commander of the entire Imperium and the Fabricator General because of protocol?'

She stared back at him.

'I understand. You have divined that under normal circumstances, she would have been awoken. In this instance, I decided it was better to let her sleep. She is fine, I assure you. I took precautions because of her age, and meant no disrespect.'

'If she is ailing I should have been told,' said Esha. 'And I should have been told of the orders. While the Great Mother is asleep, I am determined Second, and was elected princeps seniores of this Legio before the voyage.'

'Princeps seniores is a battlefield rank of brevet status. It has no standing in the determination of Legio deployment,' said Chrysophane.

'It is the best we have. I should have been consulted.'

'There was no need. She is fine,' repeated Chrysophane firmly. His telescopic legs extended, taking him up into the air. He began directing his minions with databursts and gestures of his supplemental limbs. 'Now, we really do have work to do. Please do not lapse into argumentative mode again – you are close to

modus unbecoming.'

'I am not a tech-priest,' Esha said.

'You are a servant of the Adeptus Mechanicus, and therefore subject to its laws,' he said.

The priests took up station around the room, some swinging censers, others relieving the more junior enginseers from their stations in the cloisters, who bowed and departed silently. Devices were wheeled in and hooked up to machine banks and struck with golden spanners to the time honoured rhythms of good function. The pitch of noise in the room changed. The harmony of machine song was disturbed. Peace retreated from the room. *Luxor Invictoria*'s steely wrath took its place.

'I'll be lodging a formal article of dissatisfaction about this,' Esha said.

'Forgive me for saying, but it is not for you to decide anyway,' said Chrysophane.

Esha stepped down from the walkway. Instinctively, her maniple sisters reformed around her, spreading out along the walkway as if they were machine-bonded to their engines and providing covering fire from high ground.

'You are wrong,' said Esha.

Chrysophane was not insensible to Esha's concern for her mother, and wise enough in the ways of baseline humanity to see that her fear caused her behaviour more than the potential break in the chain of command. He bowed in conciliatory fashion. 'Well. Soon we shall see. When awoken, the Great Mother of the Legio will have her say. That really is the last of it, for I must terminate our discourse and communicate directly with *Luxor Invictoria*.'

The chanting grew louder. Servitors strode in bearing heavy metal boxes. A whoosh of methalon blasted from a venting pipe behind the Titan's neck ring. Metal creaked as it contracted in the cold. Lights in the head blinked in rapid sequence.

'Very well,' said Esha. She bowed and clicked her heels together. 'Your holiness.'

'Princeps majoris,' said Chrysophane.

A klaxon blasted twice. A machinic whine built. Mechanisms engaging beneath the floor shook the naoz. Flashing lumens blinked into action around the rear of the chapel. The back wall cracked along hidden seams and swung open upon the drop-ship hangar bay behind the naoz where the First Maniple god-engines stood bathed in an orange sodium glare. The air in the engine hold was stale and carried the gunpowder stink of the open void. Compared to the rich interior of

the naoz, the hangar space was miserly in decoration, all bare plasteel and plain undercoat. The jewel-box glory of the temple was diluted by its utilitarian vastness. The holy became mundane, more of a factory than a fane, though both were places of worship to those of the Cult Mechanicus.

The other princeps came off the walkway, except Toza Mindev, who tarried and craned her neck to look into the hangar. Klaxons honked as *Luxor Invictoria*'s head slid backwards on rails revealed by the chapel's transformation.

'Princeps Mindev, we are leaving,' said Esha. 'We should not disturb the Great Mother's final moments of peace.'

'One more minute, please, princeps majoris,' said Mindev. 'I wish to look upon the myrmidons a moment. It has been too long since I bonded with my own engine, and the god-engines of First Maniple are the exemplars of our Legio.'

'No. Now,' said Esha more forcefully. 'You will see the gods of war walk soon enough, and through *Procul Videns'* eyes.'

'Yes, princeps majoris,' said Mindev contritely, and came down. Esha waited for her to get into line with her comrades, before turning smartly on her heel and ushering her maniple out of the chapel through the bustle of priests awakening the Grand Master of the Legio Solaria.

THREE

The Way to Theta-Garmon

Mohana Mankata Vi bathed in a liquid warmth so different to the caress of sunlight on bare skin. She was blind, and for a moment did not know where she was. She opened her mouth to speak. Liquid moved around the aching stub of her tongue. It was already in her lungs. She was drowning without dying, but she did not panic. Many thoughts were coursing through her mind. One came to prominence, and expressed itself as a line of text across the darkness of her mind.

<Item: Where is the sun?>

Disembodied chatter answered Mohana Mankata Vi. A hundred voices, human and machine, all gabbling at once.

<Item: Where am I?>

There was no soft breeze, no sensation but that conveyed by alloy skin and wire nerves. No taste but the aseptic amnion that filled every cavity of her body. No cold air to rouse the lungs. Her flesh was soft with years of immersion. Her environs were precisely the same heat as her internal temperature, blurring the boundary between her body and the medium she floated in. She kicked her legs. They were feeble, and she realised she could not have walked were she free. She lifted a hand before her. Its outline was a blur in the thick liquid. She clenched her hand into a fist, and let it open. Her fingers were withered sticks.

<Query: Where is my strength and beauty?> She asked a question every old woman who had once been a girl asked herself. <Query: When did I become so

old?>

Her heart raced. A second voice answered her, exactly the same as the first.

<Item: I was dreaming. The dream is over. Item: I awake.>

Outside the tank a chime rang, the first external stimulus she processed. Although the noise was muffled by armourglass and the liquid, as soon as she became aware of the chime other sensations reached her, conveyed by waking machine senses and the motion of the liquid she floated in. The head of *Luxor Invictoria* was moving. She drifted through the liquid, belatedly changing direction as the head shifted. The head came to a stop, and she carried on moving into the tangle of hardlines jacked into her spine, brain and the remnants of her gut. She knew where she was. After the false veracity of her machine memory, her condition came as a shock all over again.

<Item: I am Grand Master of the Legio Titanica Solaria. Item: I am permanently installed in an amniotic tank in the head of the Tigris-pattern Warlord Titan *Luxor Invictoria*.> The voice was her voice, a part of and yet separate from her. Similar voices spoke from other scripts, detailing external change, systems readiness, and a myriad other things. Many of the voices chattering in her head were her own.

She did not wake like a woman any more. So much of her being was meshed into the war engine's soul that she was already processing multiple strands of data before she was fully conscious. The effect made her feel like a passenger in her own skull, and that her consciousness had been reduced to some glitchy artefact in an enormous mechanism. She was becoming data-lost, close to being one with the Machine-God. The feeling excited and appalled her equally. At no time was it stronger than when she awoke.

She sorted the incoming information. Logistics chattered in her mind. Data screeds rolled down the fields of her coopted imagination. Vox emanations sounded in her mind. Machine voices competed with them. From these she isolated the voice of her primary data font and consigned the others to temporary oblivion.

<Item,> the data font stated emotionlessly. <Warp exit in three hours, fourteen minutes subjective.>

This troubled her. The chronographs of *Luxor Invictoria* suggested an arrival four days later, though of course any projected journey time in the warp was at best a guess.

<Query: Destination.>

<Item: Destination Theta-Garmon, Beta-Garmon cluster.>

<Query: Destination change. By whose command?>

<Item: Command issued by Magos Principia Militaris Goten Mu Kassanius, Archmagos Maxima Dominus Machina Dei, Legio Solaria.>

<Query: Why?> The data font was a simple-minded thing, a conglomeration of semi-sentient systems and a sliver hived off from Mohana Mankata Vi's own intellect. It could be annoyingly obtuse, and needed frequent prompting.

<New orders received.>

The boom of metal clamping on metal rang through the hull, quivering the thick preservative amnion of the tank. Mohana's ancient body felt the head being lifted high.

<I am being reconnected to *Luxor Invictoria*.>

<Correct,> responded the data font.

<Query: Why was I not woken to receive the orders?>

The chattering data font gave no reply, but churned out a mess of numbers describing the head's movement through the air.

<Why was I not woken?>

<Unknown. No reason given.>

<Query new order source. Relay order content,> she demanded.

<New orders received, astrotelepathic communication, primary/sole relay duct Carthega Telepathica, Beta-Garmon Three. Origin point Imperial Palace, Terra, Imperium capital world. Message coherency plus/minus ninety-two per cent. Translation accuracy aestimare ninety-eight per cent. Receptor Astropath Prime Apparani, message interpreter Astropath Prime Apparani. Message cleansing, Adept Chin Sa. Secondary message corroboration Astropath Jaikwon, Adeptus Astra Telepathica. Date stamp 832.013M31.>

<Order content,> she repeated.

<Order content as follows,> stated the data font. <Legio Solaria to break warp at earliest opportunity for Theta-Garmon. Defend Garmon shipyards, Theta-Garmon Five. Siege breaking under way. Enemy void assets alpha-plus threat grade fleet. Legiones Astartes presence minimal. Main ground assault assets demi-Legio traitoris, Legio Vulpa, Legio Fureans. Other assets: unknown/unsubstantiated. Primary objective: hold traitors. Blunt advance. Take and hold forward base for eventual reconquest. Theta-Garmon must not fall under complete control of the enemy, at any cost. By order Imperial Lord Commander Rogal Dorn, primarch, Legiones Astartes Seventh Legion. Mission specific data appended. Psy-stamp appended, Zagreus Kane, Fabricator General, Adeptus Mechanicus.>

<Hold,> commanded Mohana Mankata Vi.

The opening message was short and terse. The more complicated the message, the more likely the content of whatever vision the astropaths exchanged would be incorrectly translated. This one seemed to be accurate. The Legio's astropaths were of the highest grade, and an astrotelepathic temple-relay of the Carthega's size guaranteed message-visions would come through with clarity. Secondary corroboration meant it was reliable. A long stream of psycho-cyphers and inviolacy coding that ran through Mohana's mind afterwards suggested it had not been intercepted or altered by the enemy.

<Do you wish to hear mission specifics?> asked the data font.

<Supposition: Message is genuine. Statement: Orders received are to be acted upon. Item: Magos Principia Militaris acted without proper authority.>

The last she noted in her log as an act of defiance. She was bound to be sidelined eventually. There were two possible reasons: betrayal, or imminent death. She discounted the first. The Imperial Hunters and their Mechanicum priests were loyal to the core. That meant the latter. They would never tell her she was about to die, but if the priests were beginning to usurp her authority she probably didn't have long left in this life. She could feel her mind fragmenting. At some point in the near future, they'd disconnect her from the mind impulse unit after action, and her consciousness would not return from enmeshment with *Luxor Invictoria*. To all purposes she would be dead, her body inconvenient organic waste fouling the cockpit.

<Do you wish to hear further mission specifics?> repeated the data font.

She ignored it.

<Query: Estimate remaining lifespan, this biological unit.>

There were a few seconds of silence. The flow of data input grew physically noticeable as an electrical tickle at the top of her neck. *Luxor Invictoria*'s cogitation systems were performing calculations in concert with her brain. The two systems, machinery and mind, worked indivisibly as one.

<Estimate of continued life of Mohana Mankata Vi: ten months, six days, forty-seven minutes. Mental overlap increasing. Comingling of machine and organic spirit at thirty-seven per cent and rising. All hail the machine.>

All hail the machine indeed, Mohana thought to herself, although there was not really such a thing as 'herself' any more. *Luxor* would hear the bite in her thoughts. She was glad he had not woken fully.

<Item,> she thought. <Set reminder, three days' time, begin succession planning.>

<Confirmed.>

She shut the data font off and paid only cursory attention to the information streaming through her cortex, but she saw that no ships were lost in the warp. The great Ruinstorm had weakened further while she had slept. The Astronomican shone brightly once again and the passage had been smooth compared to the horror jumps of the last few years. The empyrean had calmed. All this gave her hope.

The smaller movements of *Luxor Invictoria*'s head were barely perceptible to her human senses, but she felt every motion though the Titan's sensorium. The sensations grew in intensity as the machine's animal sentience stirred. He was being brought to life by the ministrations of the priests as they prepared to resocket the head in the gargantuan body. *Luxor Invictoria* had a minimal sense of touch and only a crude grasp of pain, but other senses took place of these inferior human faculties. She felt everything he did. How could she not? She was *Luxor Invictoria*.

As the head swung out high over the deck of the drop-ship hangar where the Titan's body waited, her mind went back to the plains of Procon, and Hamaj. The sensation of commanding a Titan was akin to riding a horse – at least, the feel of two minds responding to each other was similar. The machine bond was more intense, deeper, more intrusive. The mind of a princeps and her god-engine meshed in a way that no other partnership could match. Unlike riding a horse, it was a cold intimacy. There was nothing of friendship in the bond with the Titan. It was a marriage of convenience in which both sides bickered for dominance.

She reengaged with the flow of information coursing into *Luxor Invictoria*'s manifold from the Legio infosphere.

<Relate mission specifics,> she commanded. She might not have long, but she could make her last days count.

As the data font began to lay out the details of the battle plan, a momentary feeling of what Mohana had been overwhelmed her. She looked at the rueful contrast between herself then, and herself now. What she had become was the direct result of that reckless moment two hundred years ago, when she had taken the cog from the men of her house and held it up in defiance of every constraint placed upon her. The clean-limbed girl with clear eyes and strong bones lived only in her mind. For pride, Mohana had condemned herself to a life of a kind she could never have imagined, yet in doing so she had gained power beyond the dreams of the most ambitious Knight of House Vi.

The gods of war walked to her command.

The bounds of reality stretched. Space inflated. Fixed points of stars became circling smears, their light dragged out by a dimensional singularity of uttermost black. A crawl of multi-coloured lightning jagged from fringes of the null-point, limning the darkness with lines like the radial muscles of an iris surrounding the pupil of an eye. With a sucking roar that defied the airlessness of the void, the pupil swelled and burst, opening up a vista on the howling madness of the reality just beyond the awareness of mankind. For a moment the rift billowed, threatening to swamp everything with lights of no natural hue before it stabilised.

Opposite the rift, the inky blackness of the materium stood immutable. The innumerable stars of the Machine-God's great work shone steady and true away from the corrupting effects of the warp-void interface. Burning brightest of all the stellar lights was a vast field of stars and gas. A nebula largely done with childbearing, it provided an ordered mirror to the disorder of the immaterium roiling on the other side of the hole in space and time. It was an adornment on the machine of creation, a jewel wrought by a god with an eye for beauty. Luminous gas clouds fixed in predictable, cellular patterns of fractal dispersion operated to the sacred laws of physics. A few stars were still forming at the points of the greatest remaining mass, but though wreaths of gas arced gracefully over the central part, in the main the core was fully wrought from the cosmic clay of dust and light. There, the curls of matter, though captivating to look upon, were mere afterbirth of the dozens of fully-fledged systems glowing in the wide black gaps, where, aeons ago, the nebula had collapsed into life. This rich, globular star field went by the name of the Garmon Cluster, and thence the Legio was bound.

Through the heaving gap a mighty fleet proceeded. Ship after ship poured from the warp rift. Dozens of metallic glints raised by immaterial storms and hard starlight scintillated on the angles of their hulls, multiplying by the second as the Legio Solaria made its translation from madness to order.

As the Legiones Astartes had their fleets, so did the Legios Titanica. Titans were the galaxy's most potent fighting machines, but they were of no use if their wreckage was scattered to the void before they set down upon the battlefield. Any enemy commander with a modicum of sense would do his level best to ensure they never reached the warzone, and so to get where they were needed, Battle Titans required protection of the most powerful sort.

At the centre of the fleet were two giant conveyors of Titans, the *Tantamon* and the *Artemisia*: huge, unlovely craft, more akin to the cargo hulks of the chartist

captains than the sleek glories of Imperial warships. Their permanent structure was spindly; most of their volume was taken up by maniple drop-ships. The Titan conveyors carried six of these detachable craft apiece: long, hexagonal transporters that were little more than giant engine arrays clustered around echoing hangars and stores, their undersides bulky with grav impellers and retro thrusters. Enormous amounts of power were required to bring Titans down to a planet's surface, and nigh on incredible amounts to deliver an entire maniple as these ships were designed to do; therefore each drop-ship had a reactor of a class more usually installed upon a frigate, squashed into its upper parts by cunning engineering.

When the drop-ships were deployed, the conveyors were left as bare skeletons shaped like letter Hs. The command superstructure projected from the bar of the H dorsally and ventrally, extending far enough out that the sensor clusters mounted atop its spires could see over the drop-ships while they were still attached.

Because they were designed to deliver the mightiest ground weapons available to mankind into zones of intense warfare, the conveyors were heavily armed. Both the upper and lower surfaces of the sticks of the H were equipped with castle walls, behind which the giant robotic infantry of Knight warsuits could shelter and add their weapons to those of the ship during battle. Many guntowers bearing powerful energy cannons interrupted the walls' length, while across the bar of the ship, angled batteries of macrocannons pointed fore and aft.

Around the *Tantamon* and *Artemisia* swarmed a great support fleet. Smaller conveyors stacked with one-Titan coffin ships flew in their shadow, as did supply barques, the void-castella of the Legio's auxiliary Knightly house, and troop transports. An entire battlegroup escorted them, with seconded Imperial vessels supplementing the formidable power of the Mechanicum vessels permanently attached to the Legio. A battleship, cruisers, frigates, corvettes… Together, it was a collection fit to rival a subsector fleet.

The final element of this armada, and perhaps the most powerful vessel of all, was the Ark Mechanicum *Metallo Mutandis*. Innards crammed with equipment provided manufactory potential greater than that of many worlds, all necessary to keep the Legio in the field, while the esoteric weapons bristling on the hull meant *Metallo Mutandis* was as well suited for destruction as it was for creation. The warp seemed to recognise the value of this prize, and only reluctantly let it go. The ark's Geller fields shimmered against squirming lashes of otherworldly energy, the reaction between the two generating short-lived horrors of luminous

corposant.

Metallo Mutandis lumbered free of the rift. The Geller field blinked off. Plasma drives engaged, and attended by its own flock of subsidiary vessels, the ark joined the rest of the armada.

When the last escorts passed from the unlight of the warp, the rift trembled, disrupting the formation of the fleet with eddies of perturbed reality.

As impressive as the arrayed Battlegroup Solaria was, it had once been mightier. The conveyor *Rule of Arrows* had been lost during the battle for Paramar, its Titans stranded and felled over the months of fighting that followed the landing. Half the Mechanicum ships the fleet had boasted at the end of the Great Crusade were no more. The Imperial Navy escort replacing them was a patchwork formation of differing liveries. Although both major conveyors retained their full complement of drop-ships, two of *Artemisia*'s were empty of Titans, and several lesser conveyors had gaps in their coffin ship stacks. Every element of the fleet had suffered the effects of treachery and war.

A convulsive shudder passed along the length of the *Tantamon* as the warp rift collapsed. Esha's hands gripped tighter behind her back. For a ship of its size, the *Tantamon* had a small, cramped bridge, and she and her fellow princeps kept to the side, out of the way.

'Warp translation complete,' said the watch officer. 'All vessels have reported in. None lost. No major incidents. Omnissiah be praised, Battlegroup Solaria sails with the Machine-God's blessing.'

'He moves aside the obstacles to victory, and guides our hands to the hilts of our weapons,' intoned the transmechanic premidius. There were a large number of magi in the crew, most of them so enmeshed in the controls of the subsystems they commanded that they rarely left their posts. Few of the ship's personnel were baseline humans. The majority were servitor cyborgs slaved directly to the wills of the transmechanics. The rest were adepts of the Machine Cult to a man.

'Raise void shields. Engage long-range augur sweep,' commanded the fleet Navarchos, Charl Coimon. As Legio Command vessel, the *Tantamon* served the fleet as the flagship, although *Metallo Mutandis* was a more powerful craft.

'No returns on auspex – the way is clear. We arrive unanticipated,' reported an augury transmechanic.

'I'll believe that when I have the evidence of my own eyes,' growled Coimon. 'Open the shutters. Let's see what's waiting for us here.'

The *Tantamon*'s shipmaster was a gruff soul. Unusually for a senior vassal of a forge world, Coimon was mostly flesh, his augmetics restricted to a single input

port in his right temple and permanently embedded hard points for the haptic command glove he wore while on duty. Although he was born of a Mechanicum-tied void clan, he was stout and heavy-boned, the beneficiary of life on a ship with functioning gravity plating. He was bald, white-bearded, clad in a uniform similar to that of an officer of the Imperial Navy, though his allegiance to Mars rather than Terra was clear from his cog and skull badges and his uniform's crimson cloth.

The oculus shutters slid back section by section. Warm light from the Garmon Cluster crept across the bridge as dawn moves around an open door. The forward three drop-ships stretched away from the command deck, their bland, orange exteriors giving little hint at the majesty of the god-engines they carried. Ranging ahead were the crenelated glories of the *Tantamon*'s escorts. A hush fell over the assembled princeps. Esha felt their awe. The sight of such a fleet made them all feel invincible.

'Lo, we are the mighty, for we carry with us the knowledge of all things,' quoted Toza Mindev from Tigrian scripture. 'The knowledge of motion, the knowledge of might, the knowledge of the gun.'

Esha nodded slowly, enjoying the spectacle of the Machine-God's power laid out for her.

'I'll take the gun over the blessing,' said Jehani Jehan flatly. 'This will be a hard fight.'

'One worth fighting. The Machine-God is generous. We will be victorious. In not so many days, the Legio will walk again for the purpose it was made,' Esha said. She spoke respectfully but without warmth. Relations between her and Jehani had been strained for years. 'This war will not last forever. The traitors will be vanquished, and the damage undone.'

'By the will of the three who is one, so it shall be,' said Mindev.

'This war is not yet done, mistress princeps,' Coimon said loudly. 'Though by every member of the trinity of Omnissiah, Machine-God and Motive Force, I pray you are right. We have our orders from Magos Principia Militaris Goten Mu Kassanius, now ratified by the Great Mother herself. All ships are to make full speed to Theta-Garmon Five immediately. Perhaps there you can hasten the end of this heresy personally.'

The Garmon Cluster was popularly known by the name Beta-Garmon. An astromancer would point out that Beta-Garmon was but one star in a subsector of several dozen systems blessed with inhabited worlds, but names spring from

power.

Following the collapse of the first great stellar empire of mankind, the second planet of Beta-Garmon had come to be the capital of the region, thereafter the seat of government for some hundred inhabited planets, moons and outposts, and so the name stuck.

There were many remarkable things about the Garmon Cluster. Most significant was that its worlds had survived the Age of Strife with much of their technology and population intact. Their nearness obviated the need for warp travel in all but the most pressing of circumstances, and when it could not be avoided the journeys were short. When the warp was inaccessible, as it had been for lengthy periods during Old Night, then real space transit could be made between the nearest systems within a few years or so. Furthermore, Beta-Garmon sat upon a confluence of stable routes through the warp that remained relatively calm while tempests raged across all the immaterium. Sheltered from the worst that terrible era inflicted upon humanity, the cluster remained a haven for millennia.

When the Imperium arrived early during its great outward expansion, the Garmonites reached compliance without a drop of blood shed. They were enthusiastic adopters of Imperium, and were repaid mightily for their loyalty. Throughout the Great Crusade, the Garmon Cluster's warp routes meant it stayed a major staging post for the Imperial war machine, and riches consequently flooded into the sub-sector. Its merchants prospered. Its worlds were transformed. Its rulers enjoyed considerable influence in segmentum government. Their voices were heard on Terra, in the Navy, and in the armies of the Imperium at the highest level. A golden age beckoned.

No longer. From the bridge the cluster looked peaceful, but Beta-Garmon was the single largest warzone in the entire galaxy.

Not even the most destructive wars of mankind could perturb the cosmos; all the species' violence was swallowed up by the immensity of space and made insignificant by distance. The shipyards of Theta-Garmon V were three days travel sunwards. At the far remove of a system's edge a sun appears only slightly larger than its sibling stars. Theta-Garmon's worlds were glints in the void arrayed across the firmament in an ecliptical line. All grew quickly as the fleet gathered speed. The diamond chips of worlds burgeoned into bright coins of albedo shine supplemented by the twinkles of plasma weapon fire, the blink-and-miss-it pulse of las-blasts, and the firefly glows of reactor explosions.

Battle awaited the Legio.

Esha Ani Mohana longed for it.

FOUR

Lord Dorn's Call

The Legio gathered in the briefing hall at the rear of the *Tantamon*'s strategium deck. Half the room was occupied, and brightly lit by warm yellow lumens. The half opposite was shadowed and as yet empty but for priests working over the hololithic arrays to ensure the transmission quality the Great Mother demanded. Full spectrum comms integration had been ordered by Mohana Mankata Vi.

In the lit half, Second Maniple waited, Durana Fahl with them as always. Fifth, Seventh, Eighth and Tenth Maniples were all in their own groups, with the mixed unit of Eleventh/Thirteenth Maniple at the end of the line. All units stood to attention in two short ranks behind their princeps majoris. The deimechanics and plasmancers of the god-engines were also present, gathered with their own kind in a loose crowd behind the Titan crews, and finally the strategos of the Legio, their officers and their subordinates forming a block of dun coloured uniforms near the gates to the strategium proper.

The *Tantamon, Artemisia* and the lesser transports moved into closer proximity with one another to ensure perfect data pulse exchange. At the prayers of the machine priests, the communications matrix fell into perfect alignment. Hunter routines spread out from digilymph nodes to swim code streams flowing through the networked cogitators and servitors supporting the fleet infosphere. They passed over the void into each others' territories, their sub-routines emitting warding cantrips at every data portal. Lessons had been learnt from the enemy's assaults on Calth and elsewhere. No enemy could penetrate the infospheric

network surrounding the ships, not by technological or sorcerous means or any combination of the two. Unauthorised entry would be quickly isolated and shut down.

The *Tantamon*'s strategium was large and ornate throughout. Its briefing hall was as finely decorated as a prince's ballroom, oval in shape, and clad with polished serpentine. Statues of the founding mothers filled niches around the hall's circuit. The largest, depicting Mohana Mankata Vi, stood at the oval's vertex opposite the gates. Loin banners of fallen Titans hung from the ceiling. Inscriptions commemorating victories filled embossed panels, while battle scenes etched in copper covered the floor and sections of the walls. The machinery of the hololithic projectors was hidden behind all this art, ordinarily out of sight, but the priests had opened up various bits of the decoration to get at the workings. Large circuit racks protruded from odd places all over the room.

Esha Ani Mohana found the untidiness of the revealed guts added to rather than detracted from the hall. It put her in mind of the Machine-God at work behind the glorious facings of the Machina Cosma. All the universe was a mechanism. Any beauty it had was a mask. With the access panels open, she felt she was seeing the mechanical truth of reality revealed.

A huge set of metal gates embossed with likenesses of the Legio's first Titans led out from the briefing hall. On the other side was the business end of the strategium deck, where tacticaria, choirs of servitors, cogitators and all the paraphernalia needful to the Legio's management were situated. Currently, this was powered down and dark but for ready lights. The Legio's strategia were effectively separate from the vessels they were located on. Each was heavily armoured and could theoretically survive the destruction of the ship itself. There were several throughout the fleet. Multiple redundancy ensured a Legio's survival, so the old tenet maintained.

Final authority rested with the Great Mother, who commanded her forces from her Titan in the field, but a Titan Legio without remote tactical support would find itself broken into its component parts, isolated and destroyed, while no princeps could hope to govern the vast web of supply needed to keep the great machines fighting. As quotidian as the rooms with their muttering tacticians were compared to the majesty of engines striding the battlefield, Esha saw these chambers as the beating heart of her order.

Some infospheric impulse passed between the priests. In eerie synchronicity they finished what they were doing, closed up the access panels and departed, leaving only three of their number to oversee the hololithic arrays. Dutifully, the

members of the trio sang their psalms of activation and commenced their sacred task. The deimechanics ignored them. As ministers to the god-machines themselves, they were far exalted over their lesser brethren.

Lenses conjured figures from nothing, which coalesced, hazy at first, in the dark half of the hall. To begin with they were true phantoms, with eyes that were hollow spaces beneath the peaks of their caps. Their limbs were curves of mist. Loop projectors thrummed in the walls and the figures gained definition, drifted in and out of focus, then leapt into glowing verisimilitude. Suddenly, the rest of the Legio was in attendance. So advanced was the technology available to the Legio that each person it projected seemed to be really there. There was no artefacting to their projections, no trace lines from the beams of light drawing in their presence or interference jagging on their outlines. Only a faint glow about them, evident solely because of the darkness of the hall, marked them out as projection ghosts. Third, Twelfth, Fifteenth and Eighteenth Maniple joined the rest of the full-strength maniples, along with ad hoc groupings made from undermanned units and the clade leaders of the Legio skitarii and secutarii contingents. Now all the strength of the Imperial Hunters was present, except their leader and her myrmidons of First Maniple.

A bass note resounded through the hall. The assembled Titan crews knelt. Priests of all ranks emitted data blurts in praise of the Omnissiah.

Above the doors, the head of *Luxor Invictoria* coalesced into view. The princeps' myrmidons shimmered in beneath it, their feet hovering a metre over the floor. Mohana Mankata Vi's maniple consisted of hard-faced women, veterans of a hundred battles. Many were the granddaughters of the Companions, those other women who, along with Mohana Mankata Vi, had formed the initial crew intake. The note blew again, announcing the telepresence of the Great Mother of the Imperial Hunters.

'My sisters of the hunt,' she said. The projected head of *Luxor Invictoria* remained unmoving, but the Great Mother's voice was passionately modulated, still human after all the years of her confinement. 'From Terra, the Lord Commander of the Imperium sends out his decree. We are to defend the shipyards of Theta-Garmon from total conquest.'

A large scale hololithic view of the gas giant Theta-Garmon V flickered into being. Banded clouds of azure and green striped its full belly, eddies at their boundaries hinting at the supersonic storms tearing around its circumference. There was little notable about the planet. Such were common throughout the galaxy, and like every other of its kind, it was uninhabitable. But tens of

thousands of kilometres of shipyards, habitation rings and hydrogen refineries surrounding it made it valuable. Unlike the Ring of Iron around Mars, the facilities did not encircle the planet completely, but together they caged its waist, and suckled from it. Theta-Garmon V was infested by humanity.

'The battle for this world has been ongoing for the last three years,' the Great Mother told them. 'Rival factions within the facilities have been making war on one another, with varying amounts of outside help, for little gain. Until recently this situation was common across the cluster, but the strategic outlook is changing. There is disunity among Imperial command. The Warmaster is attacking numerous worlds simultaneously in an effort to tip the individual conflicts here in his favour. He has launched a major assault on this world.

'We are but one of dozens of Legios called. I do not wish you to focus on the size and majesty of Lord Dorn's Great Muster, or to dwell on the importance of the actions being undertaken on all of the cluster's worlds. You must focus upon your task, your role, and accomplish whatever mission is given you no matter how arduous it may seem.'

'Why is she telling us this?' Soranti Daha hissed at Abhani Lus Mohana. 'This is always the way.'

'The Machine-God has sent difficulties ahead to test us,' said Toza Mindev. 'The banalities of briefing are a cant to themselves, to program the mind with calm before battle.'

Esha Ani Mohana risked a glance back to glare at her underlings. 'Quiet,' she said. 'The Great Mother speaks.'

The princeps of Second Maniple fell silent.

'The situation around the Garmon Cluster is problematic,' the Great Mother continued. 'Since our arrival we have been attempting to attach ourselves to overall theatre command. We have been so far unsuccessful. We can find no legitimate central authority. There are hierarchies, but none worthy of fealty. So far we have identified eight different organisations claiming operational seniority.'

Others in the crowd of princeps murmured. Esha kept her eyes forward. There had been a time when she would have whispered during her mother's briefing, but she had changed since the birth of her own daughter, more since the start of the war. This occasion demanded respect.

'Elements from all over the Imperium are flooding into Beta-Garmon. If one command hierarchy is established, then we shall have the difficulty of renegotiating when another challenges it. There are no loyal primarchs in the

entire subsector,' Mohana Mankata Vi said. 'Without them, my prognosis is that this situation will not stabilise. We lack the unity Horus' leadership grants his armies. We do not have time to dicker over rights and roles. It is therefore my will that the Legio Solaria and its support group fight alone, until such time as a commander we might respect be appointed by the Emperor of Mankind.'

Maybe one already has been, thought Esha. It would be impossible to tell.

The news sat ill with the officers. They had expected a primarch. No one else could make this war a success.

'All is not lost!' said Mohana Mankata Vi. Her raised voice silenced her Legio. 'Although we do not have an indication from Lord Dorn's summons who we should follow, we do have the luxury of orders from the Throneworld itself. It is my hope that we are not alone in this, and that the Lord Commander exerts his will from distant Terra. It is a poor second best, and we shall see if it is effective, but for now, we at least have a target. We have our orders. We shall not stint effort to fulfill them until asked to do otherwise.'

The tactical hololith zoomed into a constellation of orbital docks clustered about one of Theta-Garmon's moons. Scores of stepped cavities like inverted ziggurats were gouged deep into the rock. Between these macro-mines hundreds of lesser shafts stared out blackly upon the universe. The scars of levelled mountain ranges shone with a painful, reflected light. No longer a sphere, the moon was faceted as a lump of coal. The activities of mankind had eaten into it like a cancer, hollowing it out to such a degree it could not have been far from collapse. Its circumference was marked on the tacticarium as five thousand kilometres, a small world easily confined by mankind's artifice. Wide, artificial rings where manufactoria clustered like parasites imprisoned it wholly. The moon still turned, pulling the rings with it. They were medical supports to counter the moon's infirmity, the cure and the cause of the disease.

A number of points of interest were highlighted around the moon, tagged and spectrum-coded with threat levels and markers of tactical importance. All the complex variables of war boiled down to a handful of colourful runes.

'This is Theta-Garmon Five-One,' the Great Mother said. 'It is commonly referred to as Iridium by the inhabitants of this system for the metalloid mined there. Somewhat unimaginative, but that is what we shall call it, for the sake of convenience.'

The view zoomed out. Several nearby orbitals were shaded red.

'These facilities are held by the enemy and directly threaten the moon. The Warmaster has committed large numbers of god-engines to this system, and to

this world in particular. The lack of bombardment by voidship suggests he wishes to keep the shipyards intact. This factor is in our favour. War decrees this will be an engine battle. Conflict continues within the interior of the facilities as it has for months. The traitors wish to end this siege, and it is on the surface, engine to engine, that the struggle for Theta-Garmon Five will be decided.'

Esha studied the tacticarium display. Horus' forces had most of the orbitals in their hands. There was no way a single, understrength Legio could turn the tide of battle there and retake all of Theta-Garmon V's orbitals, let alone the system. Her eyes flicked over the situation. They were going to be tasked with a stand and hold mission: take the moon, await reinforcement.

Mohana Mankata Vi confirmed her assessment a second later. 'We cannot win this on our own. Our role is to take and defend Iridium against the Warmaster's Titans. The facilities include alpha grade processing plants, ship component assembly lines and crew training collegia, but its true worth is in this infosphere node here.'

A pull-out pict of the construct in question blinked into the air.

'This is one of a dozen similar cogitation nexus relay stations situated around Theta-Garmon Five.' The relay shone brighter than its surroundings in the hololith. 'This one, however, is different. Without this one in particular, the coordinating machine-spirits within this entire quadrant of Theta-Garmon Five's orbit cannot communicate with each other. If this nexus is destroyed, the ship yards will suffer a drop in productivity of thirty-four per cent until such time as it can be replaced. This is our hostage against the traitors' attacks. We are to secure this moon. Once it is entirely in our hands, we are to evacuate all high ranking Adeptus Mechanicus personnel from other facilities to its sanctuary. We hold it until further forces join us. This area will be cleared by the fleet.' The red-shaded, graphical representations of the orbitals disappeared. 'We will cede the majority of the territory to the enemy, then strike back in force. Iridium will be the bridgehead by which Theta-Garmon Five shall be reclaimed.'

The strategy was sound. There were not enough of the Legio Solaria to take so large an area, but more than enough to hold the moon.

'Enemy assets include two demi-Legios,' the Great Mother continued. 'Legio Fureans is present in large numbers, estimated ninety-six god-engines.'

More murmured noise from the crowd.

'Our own strength is eighty-two engines operational. Fureans' allies increase the odds against us. Twenty-four engines of war support them.'

A queasy feeling wormed its way through Esha's guts. She knew before her

mother could say it who the second Legio was.

'Rejoice my kin! We have the opportunity to remove a stain on our honour,' the Great Mother said. 'Imperial Hunters, it gives me such bitter pleasure to inform you that the Legio Vulpa fights at Theta-Garmon Five.'

Murmurs were replaced by roars of outrage. Second Maniple chattered. But for Esha sound receded. Her ears rang, deadening the shouts of the rest.

A chant was starting up around the room, issuing from mouths of steel, flesh and light.

'Unto the hunt! Unto the hunt! Unto the hunt!'

'Terent Harrtek,' Esha said, her mouth dry.

'The Death Stalkers! The damned Death Stalkers!' Abhani Lus was saying. There was a depth of hatred there that disquieted Esha.

Jehani gave Esha a sideways look. 'This war has a few gifts for us after all,' she said. 'I trust it will not prove difficult for you.' She laughed loudly, a hideous, mirthless eruption of sound. It was a rare occurrence for her. Jehani and her blood-sisters were serious creatures.

'The Machine-God delivers us the chance for vengeance!' Mindev whispered. 'Rejoice, sisters!'

'Remember, if he is present,' hissed Jehani Jehan in Esha's ear, grabbing her shoulder. 'Legio first!'

Jehani let her go, leaving Esha staring straight ahead, alone in the vengeful crowd, thinking of the man she may have to face again.

FIVE

The Walls of the *Tantamon*

By the time Theta-Garmon V had grown from a glint in the heavens to a pregnant curve of green, weapons fire was already incoming to Battlegroup Solaria. The fleet spread out so that the larger ships were screened by a host of smaller craft. Las-beam strikes raised a colourful bow wave of void shield displacement flare from the armada. Several hours later, the first serious attack came as a storm of mass projectiles. Solid munitions peppered the fleet in an attempt to collapse their shields for the torpedoes coming behind.

The battlegroup opened fire as soon as the machine-spirits of the torpedoes awoke and made solid target locks. Short-range particle beam and laser cannon fire crossed the void, shooting down missiles before they could deliver their payloads. Controlled plasma explosions took out the densest clouds of unguided projectiles. It was tit-for-tat fire. The defences of Theta-Garmon were unlikely to bring down any vessel at such an extreme range, while Battlegroup Solaria did not open fire with its big guns to avoid damaging the prize. The enemy Legios' fleets hung back on the far side of the gas giant. Their warships, like Solaria's, were tasked with defending their Titan conveyors. Constant auspex scans assured them there were few other vessels in the sub-system. There were many vessels throughout Theta-Garmon, but they had no coherency. Without fleet support, Mohana Mankata Vi and her shipmasters assumed the enemy would not trust their transport ships to the sole protection of the Theta-Garmon defence network.

Many Imperial forces had come this way recently, and though Theta-Garmon V virtually belonged to the Legios Fureans and Vulpa, the rest of the system was hotly contested. By hasty agreement, allied fleet elements duelled with the traitor flotillas guarding Theta-Garmon's other worlds, tying them up while Legio Solaria approached the great shipyards.

In void war, timing was all. The battle sphere was system-wide and riven with uncertainty. Unlooked for reinforcements could appear for either faction from any quarter. The battle was a patchy mess of skirmishes and was likely to stay that way, with no commander daring to leave his holdings open in case they were attacked. Threat and bluff were the orders of the day, and that allowed Legio Solaria's approach.

Disunity on the side of the Imperium was expected. The Great Mother was surprised to see the traitors equally disorganised. Even so, Battlegroup Solaria was not allowed to approach unchallenged.

The call to arms klaxons blared in the *Tantamon*'s Halls of Communion. In each one, a dozen thrones mechanicum waited under red spotlights, shrouded with sterilising gases. They clung to polished steel rails, ready to release their holding clamps and drop into the warsuits at rest in the Galleries Transcendent, the most heavily armoured part of the *Tantamon*'s permanent structure, and the place where the tied Knights of the Legio were kept.

Baravi Hanto was prepared to fight. His moustaches and the small triangle of his black beard were freshly waxed. His hair was slicked back and parted well clear of his skull interface points. His uniform, though hidden beneath his battle garb, was immaculately pressed.

Hanto's squire Dashiel fussed around the last seals of the combat suit, tightening the straps on the armour plates. Click buckles fastened greaves around the top of armoured boots, and vambraces around reinforced gloves. The boy worked as fast as he could, which was not fast enough. Hanto waited impatiently as Dashiel attached the breastplate to the backplate, then finally moved onto Hanto's pauldrons. Upon these shoulder plates his colours were displayed. The left bore the markings of the Legio Solaria: a raptor's footprint in a black, winged circle, upon a field of bone enclosed in dark red. The right carried a broken lance clasped in the talons of a blue eagle on white, which was the badge of House Procon Vi. A painted baronial crown hovering over the eagle proclaimed Hanto's rank, while on a tilting plate hanging from his chest gleamed his personal badge of azure and argent lozenges with a mailed fist superimposed.

Dashiel fumbled the last snap catch. Hanto's patience finally broke.

'Get off, boy!' Hanto snapped, shoving the squire aside. His attendant was the son of a distant cousin and too young even for an armiger warsuit. As the highest ranking of all the house's attendants he was entitled to squire for Hanto. Unfortunately for him, Hanto thought, he was also the clumsiest. 'Learn respect, learn diligence. You are showing neither!' Hanto held his gloved finger up for emphasis close to the youth's face. The squire flinched from it.

'I-I-I-I am sorry, my lord baron,' he stammered.

'Don't be sorry, be better,' Hanto said, forcing the snap catch closed with one hand. 'The others are ready!' He swept his arm down the line of men waiting for battle, already suited and helmeted. 'Get me my helm!'

The youth turned to the wall where Hanto's wargear was stowed. The glass-fronted locker for his combat suit and body armour was empty. The helm still rested in a pool of light in a separate box over the top. As the youth reached for it, the pane shot up into the wall. He retrieved the helmet and handed it to his master.

'My lord,' he said with a bow.

'About time,' Hanto said as he rammed the helmet onto his head. Padding encased his skull. Amber plastek interposed itself between his eyes and the world. Seals took with a sudden sucking. Tiny claws clamped themselves around his skull socket. A peep sounded, his vox beads activated and the visor display fizzed into life, though it was as yet empty of information. He moved towards the throne mechanicum waiting for him in the shaft, but a lack of weight at his hip had him stop. 'Pistol! Pistol! Where's my bloody pistol?' he roared.

'Here, my lord.' The boy fumbled Hanto's gun belt around his waist. Hanto snatched the buckle from his hands and did it up himself while striding to his throne. He turned about and sat. With their leader in his place, the other Knights took their own seats. Hanto was sure they'd be sniggering behind their featureless helms. He was going to have to do something about the boy.

'Engage systems. We march for the Legio!' Hanto said, his voice amplified by his helmet.

'House Procon Vi! Legio Solaria!' His warriors shouted. 'Unto the fire! Unto the hunt! Legio first!'

'Legio first, house second. Engage,' the baron commanded. His finger hovered over the release button like a threat. Retainers and servitors responded to the criticism manifest in the gesture and hurried forward to connect cables into the interface ports of Hanto's suit. Twist locks clicked into place on his socket hard

points. Delicate feather touches of questing wires slid into the ports at the back of his neck, bringing a momentary, tingling discomfort in his teeth. This quickly receded, to be replaced by a sense of intense anticipation, and he could not suppress a grin. His visor display burst into colourful life. The sense of his own body faded. Far below, he could hear his warsuit calling to him.

The klaxon blared, rousing his excitement.

Sacristans scuttled between displays, blurting machine noise at each other. Their leader was bent double, his spine unnaturally pronounced and head elevated on a metal neck with far too many vertebrae.

'All connections operating at peak efficiency. Praise the Omnissiah!'

'Drop,' said the baron.

His finger stabbed down.

Brakes let go of his throne's restraints and it went into freefall. Louvres opened in the pipe, venting gas from the tube and removing air drag, and he dropped faster.

He tested his infospheric link. For a fraction of a second he looked upon the engines of Legio Solaria's Second and Fourth Maniples through the drop-ship's auspex eyes. Four Warhound scout Titans, two Reavers. Their hulls were dappled green and white, trim bronze, command heads and weapons cowls red, their banners red and ivory. The tiny figures of machine adepts preparing them for battle gave them scale, the smallest of them much bigger than his own Knight. Hanto felt like a king among men when he strode the field with human troopers, but here were gods to whom he was but a servant. A sharp pang of envy stabbed at his heart. If only he were permitted to pilot such a machine…

The sight was snatched away and the thought with it, the images conjured in his head replaced by rapidly cycling views of the ship's exterior. Satisfied with his link to the wider infosphere, he shut down the connection and returned his attention to his surroundings. The throne continued to fall.

The ship shook hard enough to throw him about in his throne. The bombardment was intensifying.

Spinning red lights lined the last hundred metres of the drop chute. Grav cushioning caught the throne and it abruptly decelerated. Hanto clenched his jaw in preparation for the jarring connection with his Knight.

The edges of his Knight's carapace access port sped past. The throne mechanicum slammed home. The hatch dropped hard. Atmosphere hissed into his cockpit, pressurising the interior. Lockbolts whined into place. Clamps slammed shut noisily around the throne's base, and lights and screens came on

all around him. He rested his hands upon emergency manual controls, but he never needed these. The true source of control in Imperial machines of that size was a mind impulse unit. By the miracles of ancient technology, Hanto's consciousness ran out through cables, and with great anticipation of the battle to come, he linked with his Knight, *Falcon*.

The mind of his warsuit nuzzled into his, fitting it like glove to hand, and man and machine became one. His eyes looked upon a different world. He was a metal giant, with guns for fists. The heat of a plasma reactor replaced the beat of his heart.

Hanto let out a belligerent chuckle.

'Forward!' he said, shouting into his vox pick up. 'Forward for House Procon Vi! Unto the fire! Unto the hunt! Legio first!'

The Knights were shouting their battlecries through their machines. No one could hear outside of the suits, for the whole drop-ship was depressurised, ready for vacuum operations, but it mattered not at all. House Vi's voxnet roared with aggression.

'Forward!' he bellowed. Transit clamps fell away from the Knight's feet, waist and shoulders. Swivel doors opened at the rear of the sanctuary pod.

The throne chute allowed the Knights to join with their warsuits quickly once the drop-ships were on the ground, and so range out ahead of their Titan masters. The forward doors of the Knight pods opened into the drop-ship itself, but this time, Hanto was heading up. His hands twitched with phantom nerve impulses as he urged his machine backwards through the rear doors. Pivoting gracefully, he moved towards a simple, square lifter platform.

All along the edge of the Gallery Transcendent, numbered cylinders hatched with hazard stripes swivelled open, and the Knights of House Procon Vi strode out. Ever critical, Hanto thought the effect would have been better had they emerged in perfect unison, but even with the cylinders opening out of sequence and the Knights taking to their lifters in their own time, it was an impressive sight. In every drop-ship docking arm the same thing would be happening. Hanto checked in with the lance leaders of the other Knightly banners to ensure all was going to plan. He wished he were already outside on the ramparts, where he could see the hundred Knights of Procon Vi rise up and take to their defensive positions, but it was a spectacle for the enemy to enjoy. He determined to make their entrance as impressive as possible. The very least they could do was arrive more or less together.

'House Procon Vi, rise!' he commanded.

Five score chimes rang in his helm in acknowledgement. His Knight's knees bent with sudden, grav-impelled acceleration as the lifters rose, bearing the Knights of House Procon Vi to the battlements of Legio Solaria's floating fortress.

The lifter coasted to a gentle stop. Gravity shifted treacherously. A weightless Knight was easily toppled. Mass, not weight, was the deciding factor in any damage it would take should it fall.

'To the walls!' Hanto commanded.

Red lights flashed around the lifter portals and the doors cracked open on starkly lit battlements. Void shield discharge and explosions flickered conflicting patterns of light into the shaft.

Hanto stepped out onto the battlements of the *Tantamon*. The first step was light and unsteady, but as *Falcon*'s foot passed the threshold he felt his centre of gravity shift over the grav-plated wall-walk, and the claw toes clanged onto the deck with reassuring solidity.

The Knights of House Procon Vi emerged and took up their positions along the battlement. Crenellations as tall as ten men lined the ramparts on both sides, protecting a wall-walk wide enough for a pair of Knights to pass each other. Gates opened in the base of the towers that broke up the length of the parapet to let the Knights through to their stations. Through the temporary tunnel, Hanto saw other lances moving to the firing platform set into embrasures in the battlement. On the other arm of the *Tantamon*'s H and on the bottom of the ship a similar muster was under way. Scores of his house manned the walls. He took up his own position.

In a fight like this, his warriors needed little ordering. Each was a master of warfare in his own right, even away from open battle and the complexities of formation change, redeployment and darting attacks that were a Knight banner's forte. They waited patiently, without fear, on the top and bottom of the ship. Hanto need not say anything. He spoke nevertheless, his voice carrying to all the hundred aboard the *Tantamon,* and across the void to the seventy upon *Artemisia.*

'Knights of House Procon Vi, stand firm.'

By now, his mind was enmeshed with that of *Falcon*. He saw out of its eyes. The restlessness that possessed him between engagements was gone; he experienced a sort of savage contentment within the mind impulse link. He was a hound, tensed, alert, ready to be released.

For the moment there was little for his Knights to do. The void shields of the *Tantamon* were multiply layered. They would hold against a bombardment of this magnitude for hours. As yet, no strike craft came against the walls.

Falcon's head turned under its armoured cowl at Hanto's unspoken command. Through its false eyes Hanto watched the moon of Iridium and its attendant orbitals rush towards him through the void. Theta-Garmon V brooded behind, half its striped bulk softly shadowed, the other glaring in the light of the sun. In the airless void there was no sound from outside save that conveyed by direct vibration in the ship's fabric, so his hearing was full of the ticks, bleeps, whirs and whines of the systems working within his warsuit. As a sleeper on a silent night becomes entranced by the strange, organic noises emanating from his body, so Hanto drifted into the mechanical life of his fighting machine. Bereft of outside stimulation, his organic senses intruded over his Knight's input, and he led a doubled existence, simultaneously a man and an iron giant. Some found this sensation led to dislocation. But it fascinated him. He explored it.

An urgent beeping broke his reverie. A gridded vector map superimposed itself over his field of vision. Pulsing red dots raced towards the *Tantamon.*

'Assault craft, incoming, all vectors. Prepare to repel boarders!' he commanded.

As he gave the order, his machine vision caught sight of the attackers as glints in the storm of war, steadier lights against explosions and writhing void shield activity. The bombardment suddenly dropped off on most of the shield, but intensified on the forward left. Shells burst; blinding spheres of atomic fire flattened themselves on the aegis, linking up, subsuming shield aurorae into their violent blaze. The hits became a rolling wall of fire.

More chimes sounded in Hanto's mind. The void screen was coming down, individual shields dropping one after another. The last shield burst with a display of purple lightning so intense it outshone the destructive forces that brought it down. A last couple of hits brought a few more discharges, then the bombardment ceased, and the approaching ships became easier to see. A swarm of darts arrowed for the gap in the shields. Somewhere, in the depths of the hull, burned-out generator coils would be in the process of being swapped out by giant machines and cohorts of specially modified crewmen. A Titan Legio could die in the void without firing a shot. Ship shields had to be raised fast when they were brought down.

Hanto reactivated his link with the *Tantamon*'s teeming cogitator network. Status screens for the vessel popped into life across his vision. He dismissed them all but for the shield matrix data screed. A counter ran down rapidly

towards zero. The voids would not be raised in time to stop all the ships coming in to assault. Good, he thought. He welcomed the foe. His weapons stirred.

'Stand by, my Knights!' Hanto called. His Knight suit gave a challenge only it and Hanto could hear in the silent dark. Impulses raced to war-horns that could not sing without air, but all the Knights heard the call within their second, machine-made world. 'They are coming!'

The glints grew. The first passed the limits of the aegis fields rapidly. In an eyeblink, half were through, jinking madly to avoid the *Tantamon*'s point defence fire. Several exploded, cored out by las-shot.

Range finders trilled excitedly in Hanto's helm. His Knight shifted in anticipation. The trill became a clear note. The enemy were close enough that his warriors might hit them.

'House Procon Vi, open fire!'

He himself was firing before he finished the order. The rapid-fire battle cannon on his right arm pumped out three-shot salvoes while rockets streaked out from his carapace-mounted array. His thermal cannon was not yet within focal range. Its machine-spirits clamoured like children denied a treat in their desire to shoot.

In the vacuum his shells were silver streaks. He tracked an assault ship across the void, hammering it with explosions. A missile hit from his storm spear pod broke the ship's back, and it came apart into fragments, spilling bodies and brief flames into the void. He shouted with triumph. All along the wall the Knights were swinging their huge, ponderous torsos, adding their fire to that of the ship. The counter in Hanto's head reached zero, and the aegis flickered back into life. The stragglers of the attack swarm slammed into its surface, exploding on the newly raised shield screens, half their mass shunted into the warp in eruptions of blue and violet light.

By then, the foremost assault shuttles had made it to the ship. They were strange-looking craft. Several limpeted onto the hull, spread arms clamping them into place. Fusion fires flashed through gaps as they chewed their way into the hull of the *Tantamon* and its drop-ships. Ball-mounted lascannons hidden in the parapet's machicolations came into action, sweeping the walls of the space-faring fortress free with flicker blasts of coherent light.

Those unlucky enough to land upon the tops of the drop-ships were easily picked off, but they were poor landings, and the majority were headed for the castle wall itself. The whole venture was practically suicide, but though desperate, a successful attack offered a great prize – the capture of a demi-Legio of god-machines. If the enemy took the wall, others could land upon the drop-

ships unopposed, while the Knights' lifters offered a way into the *Tantamon* itself.

An assault shuttle streaked past Hanto, out of control, engines firing wildly. It crash-landed to bounce along the wall-walk. Arms extended from its sides and drove mechanical claws like picks into the hull. They were torn off by the score, but the craft slowed, until finally it slammed to a halt. On its remaining limbs the ship rose up and scuttled forward, revealing itself as an oniscidari drop-tank. Panels slid aside to extrude plasma callivars, which immediately opened fire. The boarding ramp at the prow dropped, and out poured two dozen heavily armoured cyborgs of False Mechanicum skitarii. Hanto fired his thermal cannon down the throat of the passenger bay before the ramp could rise, obliterating the craft in a ball of blue fire, but it was only the first. Dozens more filled the void and crashed down onto the wall-walk.

The fight was as brutal as any feudal escalade. The Knights were tall, and powerful, and their weapons smashed apart the drop-tanks as soon as they landed, but the boarders were elite vanguard troopers in self-sustaining armours, numerous and wielding weapons of the deadliest kinds. These were no lowly tech-thralls, but a specialist void-clade of the highest specification.

One of the Knights near Hanto went down to a well-aimed fusillade of plasma fire. Searing beams overloaded its ion shields, and sliced into the vulnerable joints at the knees and elbows. One weapon fell limp; the other bounced off the parapet wall and floated away, free of the artificial gravity of the wall. The Knight fell backwards. Gas and flame vented from the cabin. The pilot's screams rose in an agonised pitch before abruptly falling silent. The wall shook as the back of the Knight blew out, demolishing part of the parapet, and an expanding cloud of fire flung the Knight's slayers about like leaves in the wind. Hanto leaned into it, ion shield swivelled front. When the blast cleared, several enemy drifted dead, but the majority recovered, rerouted their systems around their damaged bionics and pulsed their built-in void jets to return to the ship.

Hanto abandoned his position, turning his attention from the void to the wall-walk. The majority of the enemy had landed and were swarming over his warriors. Their assault shuttles-turned-crawl tanks fired lances of plasma from all angles. Hanto switched his own ion shields about rapidly to take the worst of the fire, but the enemy were everywhere and attacking everything, and the ion shield's directional placement was a continuous set of compromises.

A Mechanicum war was not fought on the physical plane alone. Some of the assault ships carried machinery squirming with malevolent code instead of

troops. Upon landing, they extended their limbs and crawled over the craft like ticks, antennae probing the hull in search of vulnerable data conduits. Where they found their targets, mandibles splayed, and adamantium-tipped probosces speared the metal, injecting optic pipes with a deadly cargo of ones and zeroes. Within the *Tantamon*'s infosphere loyal hunter killer spirits grappled with these invaders, while dedicated data-mages of the cyber-thaumaturgia formulated new avenues of defence against semi-daemonic scrapcodes. As the defenders adapted, the invaders fought back. Evolutions that would take millennia in an organic system took place in seconds.

Other craft carried microscopic machines that ate through metal and attacked systems more directly by severing cables and short-circuiting vital conduits. Again, the *Tantamon* had an answer. Beetle-bodied scavengers emerged from ducts and gathered up the tech-mites with high-power magnets and gravity hooks, breaking them down into their component parts for later use.

This was war of the most total kind. From machine-spirits through microscopic machine life to modified humans, all the way up to war engines many times taller than a man, all fought over the body of the ship.

In its own way, the Mechanicum fighting itself was more terrible than the burning of planets by the Legiones Astartes. A world's rocks do not make war. The ship was a world, and the entirety of it was at war. Nothing was spared violence. All was drafted into the fight.

Hanto bulled his way through the press of the enemy, crushing boarders beneath his feet. Globules of blood and oil drifted into space. A breaching team were attacking one of the lifter gates with lascutters. As he passed, Hanto swivelled his warsuit's torso and cut them down with a measured burst of heavy stubber fire.

The *Tantamon* shuddered under the unkindness of battle and sabotage. Another wave of attackers was coming in, preceded like the first by a heavy, shield-stripping bombardment. Beyond the shields the rest of the fleet was fighting. Black lightning scored the surface of space as the *Metallo Mutandis* targeted the enemy's weapons emplacements upon the moon. Flights of destroyers and servitor-piloted combat craft blurred overhead, engaging False Mechanicum fighters escorting the second wave of boarders. All of *Tantamon*'s guns were firing. Behind Hanto's position the macrocannons slung tank-sized shells towards the orbitals and their monitor ships. Las-fire interlaced in a deadly web across the crowded sky.

By now the battlement was a disorienting seethe of discharging weapons,

swinging giants' limbs and explosions, made all the more confusing by the *Tantamon*'s guns, the bombardment and the aegis' response to it. Actinic light burst from multiple vectors, whiting out *Falcon*'s autosenses and throwing everything into hard relief.

In places the gravity plating was breaking down. Hanto had to watch his step. He couldn't use his thermal cannon on the wall-walk, and even the battle cannon was a risk to the ship's hull, but he had no close combat weapon like others, who swept away dozens of foes with every strike of their reaper chainswords or grabbed up scuttle tanks and crushed them in their gargantuan fists. The fortification could take a little friendly fire, he told himself, as he let off two shots into a knot of skitarii. Perfectly spherical explosions blasted them to nothing. Shrapnel passed around Hanto's ion shield, pattering off his armour like rain.

Once more, *Tantamon*'s void banks winked out, and the second wave of enemy assault craft speared through the hole in the aegis, chased by flights of friendly interdiction craft. Though the servitor ships and *Tantamon*'s anti-fighter weapons took their toll, more of the second wave made it through now the Knights were occupied with the fight on the wall.

Hanto had no time to spare for the newcomers. He continued his struggle to clear the battlements. By the time he could pause and take stock, the second wave had come down, and they were attempting a different manner of entry.

All over the roofs of the drop-ships, traitor assault shuttles were clamping themselves to metal. Gunfire blazed from the wall cannons and the ships. A few of the craft disgorged their troops to form defensive perimeters around the craft and take down the wall defences. These newcomers were of a different order again.

'Thallaxii!' he voxed. 'Thallaxii and automata on the drop-ships! Heavy assets are assaulting the drop-ships!'

He grunted as he fired his thermal cannon, immolating a score of the enemy.

'They are going for the Titans,' he said.

The muster of Legio Solaria

SIX

Combat Drop

The Titans had been brought up to combat-ready status well before the attack, the process beginning as soon as they arrived in-system. People looked to the size, might and weaponry of the god-machines as the signifiers of their power, but a Titan's greatest weapon was the machine mind housed within, and the first part of a Legio's process of war was to awaken them. The longer the period of activation, the better. A long period enabled all the rituals to be undertaken correctly, with the approved amounts of sacred oils, incense and other libations needed to ensure good function.

The crews were barred from the ceremonies. While the priests of the Cult Tigris undertook their duties, Esha Ani Mohana fretted outside the drop-ship. Always, she went to the loading bay portal set into the vast drop gates of the ships. It was the closest she could get during the ceremony.

She was never alone. Durana Fahl usually arrived before she did. Toza Mindev was another regular. Some of the moderati were usually present. The rest showed up as they wished. The thought of the machines coming to consciousness without being connected to them filled the crews with a sense of medical violation, as if it were their bodies that were being poked and prodded during the priests' strange rituals. Because of the same feelings, some preferred to stay away.

The divide between human operator and metal giant was small, and grew smaller with every joining. The sense of disconnection out of battle was

profoundly uncomfortable for some, and that also grew with every separation.

The Imperial Hunters did not favour immersion tanks for their princeps unless absolutely necessary. Their way of coping with machine disassociation was to immerse themselves in the physical whenever out of the manifold. While on-planet they hunted according to the habits of their ancestors. Aboard ship they sparred, or undertook military training. They held modest recreations of Procon's lordly feasts. They remembered the ways of their kind.

Distraction kept them sane between battles. None of it was enough when the machines began to wake. The moment the first rites of activation were performed, Esha Ani Mohana felt *Domine Ex Venari* calling to her. Shooting pains afflicted her extremities. Her palms were constantly damp. She could not sit still. A mix of maternal yearning and narcotic withdrawal ran electric pains through her nervous system.

Each of the human components of the god-machines had to deal with these feelings in their own way. They supported one another, and that helped, but the help only went so far. Everyone suffered according to their own habit.

After awakening, the machines were tested for mental soundness by the Vox Omni Machina. The priests kept their secrets close, but Esha knew the Vox Omni Machina linked with his charges directly, and that added an outraged sense of jealousy to the turbulence in her soul.

The princeps were allowed in to see their machines during the second phase, but not to interface. It was dangerous to rouse the spirits of the war gods without good reason. They were swords that could not be sheathed until blooded.

During this period of maintenance, Esha stalked the hangar deck, nervous energy forcing her to take step after step until she exhausted herself. The Titans' bodies were infested with probes. Neokora crawled all over their innards. Premedius orchestrated a thousand petty indignities. Servitors trudged around every part of the interior, doggedly swapping out damaged or worn components. She had become adept at not getting in the way. The deimechanics and their crews worked around her and the others, though she knew her presence was barely tolerated.

It was a time of showers of sparks and whining power tools, of grumbling engines and hissing plasma torches, while hammers rang and priests chanted and the servitor choirs sang the same hymns on endless loop. The drop-ship hangar at that time smelled of oil and hot metal, sweat, paint and polish. There were support machines everywhere, crates, barrels, and spillages of sacred unguent. Plastek sheets hung over areas of maintenance. Scaffolds encased the Warhound

Os Rubrum to the waist to allow the replacement of a malfunctioning hip gyro. Half the priests were as busy chanting as the rest were with their tools and datalinks.

She hated this time. The link with a Titan was familial. While *Domine Ex Venari* was helpless it felt like her child, ill in the hospice. She was the Titan; it was her. It was her father, she its mother. There was no division in these emotions. They made a complex set of chains, binding her to her machine in ways unfathomable to those outside the Collegia Titanica.

After maintenance, the Titans' load-outs were changed for the coming battle according to the wishes of the princeps, under guidance from the princeps majoris and Legio strategos. Their reactors were spooled up from maintenance power to pre-combat draw. The crews went aboard themselves at this point to run their own tests and calibrations, and limited mind impulse linkage was permitted under the eyes of the ever-present tech-priests. The joining was insufficient to blunt the crews' cravings. The engines' beings were not fully raised to wakefulness, and the mind blend was deadened by intervening monitoring machinery. If anything, the fleeting contact made Esha's sense of isolation worse. Her feeling of panic increased.

Only twenty-four hours before the final approach to Theta-Garmon V were the final services held for the machine-spirits, the Titans thoroughly blessed and their honour banners attached. The human contingent of the Legio was present completely for the rites, moving in solemn procession from drop-ship to drop-ship aboard the *Tantamon*, then to the *Artemisia*, and at last to the smaller conveyors and their stacked ranks of coffin ships, where the assembled officers and priests passed through fragile plastek corridors linking the smaller drop-ships to one other. Other Legios possessed conveyors that combined the advantages of coffin drop pod and large hangars. The Tigrian priesthood did not favour them.

After the blessings the crews waited in arming rooms close by the boarding jetties to their Titans. And waited. And waited. Their combat uniforms were close-fitting environment suits of void-resistant grade, topped with integrated shoulder, chest and back armour to which were locked large square helms. Armourglass face plates allowed them to look out. They were claustrophobic, heavy items where the hiss-click of oxygen provision, bleeps of machinery assuring continuous air supply and the thunder of one's own breathing shut out most of the sound from outside. At any other time, Esha would have found the sense of isolation soothing. As she waited for battle, she felt trapped by her need

to link with *Domine Ex Venari*. Each hissing burst of the air unit spiked the pains running up and down her arms and legs.

Esha forced herself to look outwards, past her suit visor and the presence of the six women around her, out into a far wider world, as she would when linked. By comparison to those too-long delayed moments of union, she was limited, but not blind. The vibrations of the ship's metal told her much. Through the pain singing in her skin, she felt the lifters propel House Procon Vi to their defensive positions. She felt the void shields collapse and the oversized clunks and bangs as their capacitors were swapped. The fire of point defence weapons added a delicate trill to the punch of big guns shaking the fabric of the craft. Hard hits sent the predictable pulse of the ship's reactors into arrhythmia. The chaotic vibrational patterns of surface combat came soon after.

'They have started without us,' said Fenina Bol, one of Esha's moderati bellatus. She craned her neck as much as she was able to look above, though there was nothing to see but the ceiling, and the fight was on both ventral and dorsal spines of the ship.

'You'll get your turn,' said Odani Jehan, Esha's second bellatus. She was like her blood-sister Jehani in lots of ways, though more inclined to tension. Whether this was because of her youth or her character was not yet clear to Esha; she was relatively new to the crew.

Nepha Nen, the third weapons operator, sniggered nervously.

'Be quiet. The wait is bad enough and you are making it worse.' The command of Yeha Yeha, moderati primus, silenced them. The weapons moderati studied the floor. No one would go against the primus' word. Esha relied on her to keep the others in line.

The remaining members of her crew were Mephani Ohana, oratorius, whose role as communications officer was vital to the far-ranging Imperial Hunters, and Jephenir Jehan, who fell between her siblings Jehani and Odani in years, but whose preternatural abilities in coaxing the Titan to move suited her well to her role as Esha's steersman. Neither of these two spoke. Reavers in other Legios might take a further two moderati, but the Legio Solaria were mistresses of the hunt, and the princeps had no need of additional crew in either the navigatorial or sensorium positions. By their ethos, a huntress should be a master pathfinder and reader of spoor. Any princeps who required help in these areas was not worthy of the name.

Esha's legs ached savagely. She forced herself not to jiggle them. Only the ready klaxon saved her from an undignified bout of fidgeting.

It was not until the first shots trembled the exposed hull of the *Tantamon,* and the roaring of the ship's reactor rushed cataract-loud down every access way, that the order was given for Esha Ani Mohana and her maniple to join with their Titans.

Lumens turned from yellow to green. An urgent tocsin sang a call to arms.

'Move!' shouted Yeha, on her feet before all the others. Esha was next, eyes on the airlock door. She slammed her palm onto the activation plate, the door spirit's announcement of her name a barely heard string of nonsense sounds. Blood roared in her ears. At last, she thought, at last!

The airlock outer door admitted them all and slammed closed. Air whomped out, and the inner door whisked itself away. A third door, this one the dull orange of the drop-ship exterior, opened a microsecond after. They passed from the *Tantamon* into the maniple drop-ship, running along the short pier leading to the rear door between the massive heat exchangers mounted on the Titan's back.

The hangar was already depressurised. A passionless machine counted down the seconds to combat drop over their voxbeads as they ran within the Reaver. They had to duck through the low door into the machine. The engine had no airlock, and the whole machine began to repressurise with atmospheric mix as soon as they were all in and crossing the cramped atrium to the armoured head. Servitors stared sightlessly at them from their alcoves. The small door leading to the command deck slid aside. Jephenir Jehan, Yeha Yeha, Mephani Ohana and finally Esha Ani Mohana clambered into the tight space, long practice preventing them cracking their large helms against the interior. Fenina Bol, Nepha Nen and Odani Jehan waited for Esha to pass into the head before splitting left and right to pass through the doors leading to the gunnery chambers set within the shoulders.

Dim light filtered through the tiny window set about the Reaver's augur eyes. The head was broad, but sloped down sharply to the front, and much of its muzzle was taken up by the socket points for the massive, armoured cables that curled away and back from the machine's face like extravagant moustaches. They could see very little out of the windows. A large vid screen display gave a view outside, but they would not need that once they were linked to the manifold.

They were all talking, all at once, flicking switches and punching buttons as they slid into their seats. Esha took to the cracked leather of her command throne with the voice of her crew and her maniple yammering at her. They were all excited, eager to be off on the hunt.

The term ‘command throne’ was overblown. The seat was little more than a pilot’s couch, and its meagre cushioning was uncomfortably divided by a line of metal housing the interface spikes for the MIU. Even in a machine the size of *Domine Ex Venari*, there was barely room for the four women of the command team. It was hot, and cramped. In seconds, none of that would matter.

‘Good afternoon, princeps.’ Magos Deimechanic Omega-6’s cheerful tones spoke into her vox. He was the only full sentient aboard not wired into the manifold, and so always spoke with her this way. His station was on the reactor deck, and its rising output jagged his words with static. *‘I have my orchestra ready to play a fine symphony to greet the rising of the sun.’*

‘Greetings, magos. You have a bizarre love of imagery for a tech-priest.’

‘You’d be disappointed if it were otherwise.’

‘That is so. Bring the reactor up to two thirds power. Prepare for combat level output.’

‘All indicators are within green parameters. I shall pray it remains so.’

‘Do. This looks like a hard fight.’

‘Hard fights mean hard use of my reactor.’

‘You know so,’ she said. She put a genuine grin into the words. She smiled so rarely now it was pleasant to remember how.

She locked her hands and feet into the control gloves and stirrups, calmed her breathing, closed her eyes, and with a sense of delicious anticipation said:

‘Interface.’

The stab of the neural spikes into the sockets set in her skull was unbelievably painful.

It was worth it every time.

Elated calm took hold of the crew. Their horizons expanded beyond the realm of flesh as their minds raced out through the MIU to mesh with piston and gun.

To outsiders, the members of the Collegia Titanica appeared very different to their tech-priest masters. They did not pursue augmentation so ruthlessly as the Martian priesthood, taking bionics only to continue service after injury, or to better interface with their machines. They did not deny their humanity. This, along with their uniforms and manners, made them seem more Imperial than Mechanicum, like naval or army officers. To other men and women they were fellow humans where the tech-priests were frightful cyborgs. The Titan crews were approachable, although they piloted the most awesome instruments of war to tread soil in mankind’s name. Not like the priests. Their obsessive need to

grub up the meat of their bodies and rethread themselves with wire seemed a most terrible pathology.

These outsiders were wrong. The Titan Legio were as devoted to the machine cult as the most flesh-hating magos. They did not replace blood with oil, but this was simply because they did not need to. They were closer to their god than any other worshipper of the Omnissiah could ever be. In battle they were its avatars, the bellicose saints and angels of the three-who-was-one, and the pains they underwent to achieve such holy transformation – going back and forth between immortal, metal might and transient organic being – taught them the value of both states. One could be man or machine, but not both at once. They alone achieved the heavenly union of humanity's sacred form with the body of the Machine-God incarnate, and found a measure of equilibrium there. Suffering was the border between the MIU manifold and the living world. By crossing it they purified their souls, so that even in their flesh form they became the apostles of the Omnissiah himself.

So the Magos Principia Militaris, the order's bishop-prince, said in his sermons. For herself, Esha did not believe a word of it. All she recognised from his words was the bliss of neuronic union, the pain of divorce from the mechanism, and the power the change gave her.

Frustration left the crew. While battle reigned in the void, calm held sway in the hangar. Second Maniple joined with their machines at a measured pace. Theoretically, the Titan should be ready for war as soon as the linkages were made, but after so long deactivated it was not. *Domine Ex Venari*'s machine soul was sluggish with long inaction, and Esha struggled to rouse it.

'Come on, *Domine*,' Esha whispered to herself. The minds of her moderati brushed against her psyche. In return, her sense of self spread outwards through them. The mind link was not and could never be entire, but enough of themselves entered each other that sometimes it was hard to tell who pulled the trigger or who saw the target first. The operation of the Titan depended on this human network. Moderati minds supported her, a pyramid of human souls with her at the apex, helping her bear the burden of cowing the indomitable soul of so mighty a war machine.

The princeps role was hardest of them all. She could not lose herself in the Titan as the moderati could. At one and the same time, she must maintain close links with her crew while retaining enough of herself to order and direct them. She had, in short, to be in two places at once.

Esha was very good at that. Although the link was still weak, already she

experienced the doubling of identity granted by the manifold as she saw from the Reaver's auspexes as well as her own eyes. On the one hand she looked through the murky oculus at the hangar, a woman inside a tower peering through a small window; on the other, she stared imperiously down from twenty-five metres high, through lenses of charged crystal at the ant-like humans scurrying around her feet. They meant nothing. Her peers were other giants. There was a second like herself, a crouched monster, whose back and shoulder joints were covered over by a mottled white-and-green armoured carapace from under which projected a wide, coleopteran head. Besides this were four other monsters, smaller, but still titanic, with dark red heads cast in the likenesses of snarling hounds, perpetually bent double as if casting for a scent. Her pack.

Esha was *Domine Ex Venari*, and it was her. A giant of legend wrought of adamantium, ceramite, plasteel, glassite and exotic alloys, brought to life by the wonders of a captive star and the power of the motive force.

Only, not entirely. Not yet. She still felt herself as a distinct being within the giant's head, not limited by her mortal state any longer, but not free of it either. This overlap was uncomfortable. It was not her fault. The final component in the machine was not yet engaged. *Domine Ex Venari*'s soul would not be woken. She chided *Domine* gently as it turned over at the touch of its mistress' mind, a dog by the fire, only half willing to leave for the rain of the forest and the joy of the kill.

The drop count was rattling down at too fast a pace. Esha kept half an eye on the battle data transferred via the Legio infospheric link to the Titan manifold. The machine's cogitators were meshing with her brain, lending her their speed. She calculated faster than any data savant ever could. Her god gave her abilities beyond mere destruction. His gifts were many.

Iridium was rapidly nearing. Still *Domine Ex Venari* sulked at her. It had waited too long since first awakening. It was angry.

Esha had no time for this.

'All crews, report in status.'

*'*Velox Canis*, standing by,'* reported Soranti Daha. Her words had an eager, aggressive edge to them. She yearned to run and fight.

*'*Cursor Ferro *anticipating full readiness in twenty seconds,'* relayed Jehani Jehan.

*'*Procul Videns *is ready to hunt,'* said Toza Mindev. *'All praise to the Machine-God.'*

Abhani Lus Mohana reported similarly from the *Os Rubrum. 'All praise. We*

are ready to walk.' Abhani Lus' voice raised conflicting emotions in Esha, as it always did. She put aside her feelings. Her daughter was a good princeps.

'Second Maniple respectfully requesting status of attached Fourth Maniple engine,' Esha voxed to Durana Fahl.

'We are ready,' Fahl said. The dreamlike savagery in her voice suggested she had already achieved union with her Reaver Titan, *Steel Huntress*. *'We walk to your command.'*

<Time to drop, two minutes,> whispered the officious voice of the ship.

'Esha,' said Yeha Yeha aloud. They had known each other so long and so intimately the use of anything other than their first names during manifold link would have been discourteous. 'The link is failing,' said Yeha. 'We're losing bond coherency.'

Esha felt it. Power was slipping from her grasp. She forced her mental grip tighter and *Domine Ex Venari* bridled at her. The reactor whined in resistance.

'*Domine* has slept too long, and she is angry at us for making her wait for war,' said Esha. 'But she will rise to my command!' She pushed herself against the machine's resistance, down towards its blazing heart. '*Domine Ex Venari*!' Esha voiced in her mind and aloud at the same time. 'Awake! Your hounds are ready. The hunt awaits.'

The Titan had no voice of its own, but it could make itself understood.

<No>, it thought-felt.

Esha constructed a mental image within the manifold. She saw herself floating in the air over a lake of fire. The dress and unbound hair of her avatar whipped about in the heat. The Titan was too powerful to be represented by a human form; it was the lake of fire.

She stared at a vortex of molten iron turning below her feet. The heat of *Domine Ex Venari*'s being was tremendous, but fearlessly she looked into the axis of the vortex, and through it into the eye of the Machine-God himself.

'I command you, great one. Awake! War comes! War is here!'

Domine Ex Venari's soul stirred. She felt it within her head. Her hands twitched involuntarily in the emergency manual handles. In her mind she saw *Domine*'s waking state as an increase of speed to the vortex's rotation. The Titan was rousing, not yet awake, but Esha had saved the best for last.

'The old foe is near. Legio Vulpa walks.'

A bellow of rage issued from the Titan's soul, represented as a pillar of fire that jetted from the vortex. Esha experienced a sensation of something huge moving beneath her skin, turning over within her bones, like an earthquake, or water

pushed up by a rising behemoth, if those feelings could be internalised within a human body. The pressure grew, pushing the mentally constructed image of herself upwards. The lake of fire rose quicker than she. Its fire licked at her feet, and devoured her.

She was laughing as her mind was subsumed into the Titan's.

Esha snapped back into her body. The power of the Machine-God slammed into her. She arched her back and cried out with pleasure that edged into pain. Notification chimes sang joyfully all over the cockpit.

'*Domine* has woken!' shouted Mephani Ohana, possessed by the machine's eagerness to fight. 'We're ready!'

'A little more respect – use the correct cant,' said someone. The tone was snappy, like Yeha. But it didn't sound like her, and the words were slurred. Esha, in her new state of ecstasy, could not tell who had spoken. It could have been several of her crew speaking as one. The drifting link surged into coherency, bringing them all into union.

Domine Ex Venari shuddered. Pistons extended in joints. Fibre muscles contracted under armoured plates. Gyroscopes spun faster and faster. Pipes tautened with pressurised fluid. The machine shifted in its berth clamps, standing tall, setting its shoulders. Lights came on all over its body. Its defence lascannons and heavy bolters stood erect in their cupolas, the subsidiary machine-spirits controlling them suddenly, murderously alert, panning back and forth for minor threats to neutralise.

Esha's back relaxed. She sank into her chair with a groan. *Domine Ex Venari* shared her pleasure; metal squealed as the Titan shifted in the restraints of its maintenance cradle.

'Reactor at one hundred per cent efficiency,' voxed Omega-6. *'All systems are running to the perfect fulfilment of sacred equations. All praise the Machine-God. All praise his Omnissiah who walks among us. All praise the Motive Force which moveth all things.'*

<One minute to combat drop,> said the ship's voice.

Only a minute had passed while she summoned the spirit of the god-engine. Hours had been compressed into those sixty short seconds. Esha looked through her own eyes and the Titan's eyes at one and the same time, and nothing felt amiss. A heart beat within her that was many times larger than her body, and hot as the core of a sun.

She was in full union with her machine.

Alarms howled in the Titan. The ground crews were scurrying for the exits.

Lights flashed. There was no air in the hangar, and the tiny people moved about in silence.

By the time the enemy burned their way through the hull, Esha was no longer quite herself.

A fall of molten metal pattered down from the drop-ship ceiling, followed by a streak of colour. *Domine Ex Venari*'s eyes caught the falling object, slowed it to visibility for Esha to see. A Mechanicum oniscidari drop-tank, its legs wrapped around itself for impact protection, bounced onto the floor, rolled to a stop and uncurled. Three more followed. They raised gun rigs like scorpions raising their tails. Mandible doors splayed wide, disgorging racks from which a dozen thallaxii dropped like seeds ejected from a pod. They too unfolded with mechanical precision, and marched towards *Steel Huntress.*

'I'll take care of them,' voxed Jehani Jehan matter of factly. Her Titan, *Cursor Ferro*, was moving dangerously in its drop lock, straining to be off the leash.

'Negative. Leave them,' Esha voxed back. Docking clamps were disengaging all around the drop-ship, the force of the decoupling enough to be felt through the plasteel of the ship. 'Do not engage. Twenty seconds to drop.' She should not have to say that to Jehani. The Titans could not fight in the hangar. Her second was letting herself be dragged under by her machine's anger.

A writhing beam of blue and white energy licked out from the drop-tank, slashing a black line over *Steel Huntress*' livery. The void shields were inoperative, the Titans bound. But they were not powerless. The point defence guns mounted around their bodies stabbed beams at the thallaxii, skewering them as neatly as a magos biologis would pin an example of some alien insect to a board. Lascannons were not an anti-infantry weapon, but when fired by the dozen they did a passable job.

Domine Ex Venari took part in this clinical slaughter. Esha experienced the Titan's annoyance. She shared its desire to stamp forward and crush the invaders flat, to erase them from existence with its primary weapons and move out to fight a worthy foe. Esha pushed back.

No, not now. You know not now.

<Drop launch,> whispered the ship's voice.

There was a lurch. The Titans banged against their restraints. The thallaxii staggered. The firing of the massive engines on the underside shook the craft. Even against so feeble a gravity well as generated by the Theta-Garmon V orbitals, landing so much mass was complex and required enormous expenditure of energy.

Doors opened all along the drop-ship. Cyborg troops poured from the barracks built into the hull where they slept like bees in cells. The light of these interstitial spaces flickered rapidly as the troops were awakened by massive bursts of combat stimms, and deployed directly into battle from suspension pods which dropped down from storage to doors in the walls. The first dozen were cut down, but the ship carried a thousand, and they poured in. A battle unfolded about the Titans' feet. Plasma trails criss-crossed the floor as the thallaxii's attentions were diverted from their targets. The fight was of no more interest to Esha than the wars of beetles, though *Domine Ex Venari* was irritated by them.

'Let the auxilia take care of them,' Esha said, as much for *Domine Ex Venari*'s benefit as for her maniple's princeps. 'Prepare for combat.'

The drop-ship angled slightly. It shook to the pounding of unseen guns. *Domine Ex Venari*'s centre of gravity shifted as the ship took a long, wide curve towards its landing zone.

There was a steep descent. Titan battleplate squealed against padded clamps. The great machine shook, blurring both sets of Esha's perceptions. A rumbling made itself heard through the fabric of the craft. The ship pitched.

A great hole blew through the wall, sending debris cutting through the tiny combatants still warring around *Os Rubrum* and *Cursor Ferro*. Luckily, neither Titan was hit. Through the breach the dazzling pyrotechnics of void war blazed. The ship shook with conflicting gravitic forces, and Esha's teeth rattled, but she was calm. This was a long way from the worst drops she had experienced.

And then, it was over. An impact jarred everyone aboard. The Titans sank to their knees, and the cyborg combatants were sent sprawling. The doors on the prow and aft of the drop-ship began to open on vast, curved hinges.

The maniple had to move quickly. They were vulnerable now to counter attack. Titans died in their landing craft, but the doors moved so slowly.

The doors finished their painful opening. Restraints fell away from arms, legs and torsos. Cable linkages dropped. Outside, a fearsome bombardment rained down from the Legio fleet, keeping whatever enemy was out there back from the landing zone.

'Legio first!' Esha said. 'Legio Solaria walks!'

The maniple exited the craft, kicking their way through the insignificant melee taking place on the deck. The Warhounds ran free, *Os Rubrum*, *Cursor Ferro*, *Procul Videns* then *Velox Canis* last. They filed out, already spreading into a hunting pattern, gathering speed, the low gravity exaggerating each pace into a bounding stride.

Esha needed no words to set her Titan going. She simply walked. She felt Jephenir Jehan's psyche below hers, like a ledge on a rock face, holding her up as she climbed for the heights of victory. The sensation was fleeting. She was *Domine Ex Venari*. Jephenir Jehan was simply another part of her.

Rockets already streaking from the apocalypse launcher set upon her carapace, *Domine Ex Venari* marched to war with *Steel Huntress* at her side.

SEVEN

Legio Vulpa Walks

Through the senses of the Warlord Titan *Nuntio Dolores,* Terent Harrtek of the Legio Vulpa tracked the incoming Imperial Hunters. There were twelve drop-ships and two dozen more single coffin craft, starting as a close-packed cloud of ships, splitting widely into two task forces. Beams of destructive light and sparkling ribbons of tracer fire followed them as they came sinking down. As they veered apart their engines sent out hundred-metre long plumes of fire and gas.

Two thirds of them were heading for the moon's surface, but the rest were coming towards the habitation and processing rings. His position.

The Hunters are coming in strength, he thought. Excitement quickened his pulse.

One of the drop-ships took dozens of hits. Fire trailed behind it and it began to fall out of formation with its sister craft. Other weapons switched targets as the defence batteries of New Mechanicum-held orbitals near the contested moon saw its plight and sought to bring it down. All of a sudden the drop-ship was ensnared in a web of destruction. Spots of hot metal glowed on its hull, spread, and gave, allowing the beams that created them to punch through and out of the other side in sprays of debris. The ship's engines guttered out, and it pitched to the side, trailing fire before coming apart several hundred kilometres over the surface of Iridium.

Broken Titans spilled out, so huge they distorted the scale of the scene, like

mariners pitched from a fishing boat. Harrtek's mouth twisted behind the large bevor jutting up from his chest. Such a shame he could not fight them all and prove his Legio's superiority, but he didn't need tactical doctrine to tell him gunning down the enemy before they got to the field of battle was a sound plan.

He was not alone in his attentiveness to the Imperial Hunters. The vox squalled in his ears, cutting into his union with *Nuntio Dolores* like a knife wound.

'*Legio Fureans Fourth and Twentieth Maniples offering support, Princeps Majores Harrtek.'*

'Support declined,' he said. He used his human voice. His jaw felt ridiculously small and distant from him. Momentarily shaken out of holy unity with his god-engine by the Tiger Eyes' communique, he saw he was two beings, not one. His human self felt like a cancer in the pure metal of his Warlord. It sickened him to be reminded of his frailty. 'The Hunters are ours.' He paused. 'Fureans Maniple Four, I demand usage of direct datapulse machine telepathy link from this point forward.' He considered a small lie to save their pride, but honour dictated truth. 'The vox is the tool of lesser beings. All hail the machine. All hail the god of war.'

He cut off any reply. His mouth shut tight. From now on, he would communicate only via the mechanisms of the machine, as was right. Nothing should distract him from the manifold.

<Moderati oratorius, sever vox connections,> he commanded, <inter and ex-Legio.>

The oratorius obeyed silently. He was not expected to reply, and no comment would have been welcome. The disconnection clicked in Harrtek and *Nuntio Dolores*' joined souls. Blessed data washed through his mind, mercifully free of the crippling fallibility of human speech.

Nuntio Dolores' senses crowded out Harrtek's own, and yet he remained dimly aware of the czella around him, and the people he shared the space with.

Steersman, navigator, sensorius, oratorius, maximus – he knew them only by their station; he never learned their names, that was not the Legio Vulpa way. He was not even sure of their sexes. *Nuntio Dolores* was a Warlord class god-engine, and commanding it required all of Terent Harrtek's concentration. Names got in the way. His moderati were helmed bodies, components in an organism of which Harrtek was the governing mind. He paid them no more attention than he did his fingernails. They retained their capacity for independent thought, but it was a distant, fuzzy thing while the crew was linked by the manifold. Harrtek felt their beings beneath his, working in concert with the

machines they watched over.

The mind impulse unit was a sublime link to the divine. Harrtek's soul blended with the avatar of their deity, his mind taken up by the red, wrathful roar of *Nuntio Dolores*' fiery soul. It thrashed beneath him, yearning to be free of his command, although ironically it could do nothing without Harrtek bridging the realms of crude matter and motive force. Harrtek forced it to his obey his will, revelling in his power as it fought fruitlessly back.

To be immersed in a machine like *Nuntio Dolores* was to bathe in pure rage. The moderati had their data blocks and neural gates and so felt none of what he did, what *Nuntio Dolores* truly was. Where they were the cowering men-at-arms sheltered behind their shields, he was the knightly lord striding forth to best a dragon by force of will alone. Will it had to be, for what sword could subdue so huge and mighty a force of mechanisms as a god-engine? *Nuntio Dolores* was a literal Titan, thirty-five metres of technological mastery given form, a demonstration to teach all that humanity's time had come, and that he carried mighty instruments of instruction.

His left fist spat the wisdom of the ancients in columns of destructive light, for on that arm he carried a belicosa-class volcano cannon, reckoned the finest of its classification in the galaxy. The tech-priests said parameters of function were all the same among different patterns of the same weapons designs, equating guns from forge worlds on opposite sides of the galaxy with one another, but they were lying. The holy men of the machines often lied to their Titan crews, Harrtek thought. *Nuntio Dolores*' cannon was better than most, a five hundred terawatt lance of pure fury. *Nuntio Dolore*s' powerful plasma reactor could supply only limited shots to the belicosa before good function was compromised. It was a killing weapon made to deliver the coup de grace.

His right hand seemed brutal by comparison to this rapier of light, an ursine claw wrought of plasteel and weighted with ferromite. Though it lacked the technological arts of the left weapon, it was no less deadly, and Harrtek preferred its direct brutality over the belicosa's reach. An arioch power claw was a weapon for close combat. Charged disruptor fields surrounded its armoured fingers, and the back of the hand mounted a pair of mega bolters that fired explosive, self-propelled bullets as large as a man's torso. The gauntlet was made to rend the foe face to face. Harrtek doubted the long-dead creator of the Titans saw the machines brawling in that way. They were purely firing platforms once, but melee was a form of war Harrtek loved far more than the distant duelling of energy weapons. At close quarters he felt alive, the thrill of metal crumpling

beneath his giant fingers, the electric jag of atoms broken by disruptor fields; these things made his heart soar. He enjoyed most of all the moments when the Titans were pressed against each other visor to visor, and he saw into the eyes of his rival princeps through the glass of the oculi, such incredibly rare split seconds, when his foes knew they were dead and he saw it on their faces. There was no finer feeling than to witness another man realise he was beaten.

Nuntio Dolores' destructive capabilities did not end with the fist. Upon its broad back it carried twinned Titan laser blasters. Not so potent as the belicosa, but fired in concert their six barrels were devastating nonetheless, spitting out a hail of fire, and far less energy hungry. Giant versions of the lasguns carried by lowly Imperial army troopers, they could gouge up the earth into molten furrows, vaporise a heavy tank, or shake the roots of a hive city.

The Titan thought about all these things the same way Harrtek did. Whether the thoughts originated in man or machine was not clear, but the composite being they made when linked had a limitless appetite for destruction. Death it saw in myriad ways, the cogitators that housed its brutal soul endlessly playing out scenarios. The contemplation alone of destruction's nature had the Titan increase its pace in its eagerness to reach the drop site, at risk to itself. The only gravity upon the station exterior was that granted by mass, and even on such a huge construct as the shipyard that was a paltry amount. Too much downward pressure in its strides, and *Nuntio Dolores* could launch itself into space, or stumble and break itself open upon the towers studding the yard: the cranes, lifters, docks and transportation rigs that made a city of machines in the airless void.

The Warlord wanted to run; it hungered to engage with its estranged kin. Though Harrtek shared the urge, he knew it for folly, and was fully occupied fighting *Nuntio Dolores*' desire to engage. His interface ports warmed in his skull. His mouth tasted of metal, and he could not tell if it was his own blood or a sensory phantom brought on by stress. He could not guide the Titan. He was so fully invested in keeping the Warlord from overwhelming its crew, he was reliant on his steersman to keep the Titan's gait steady, and that angered him. He was princeps, and he was not in control. *Nuntio Dolores*' anger gave it the strength to contest his will. Shame nipped at the machine's spirit, goading it, as it remembered a time when the engines of the Legio Solaria stood against the will of the Legio Vulpa.

Something boomed off the Titan's greaves. Harrtek spared enough of his consciousness to flick through the Titan's auspex feeds and see a broken crane

spin end over end into the void.

'Steady the machine!' he snarled.

Nuntio Dolores' stride was thrown off by the low gravity. The moderati steersman was struggling. All of them were. Graphs depicting neural feedback sprang across Harrtek's internal vision space.

'No,' he growled. 'Slowly.'

But *Nuntio Dolores* would not listen. Denying the machine-spirit only encouraged it. He had to change tactics. He had to listen to his machine. He had to follow its desires. Cautiously, he relaxed his grip, ceasing to fight it so hard.

<Maniple Seven, form up on *Nuntio Dolores*. Proceed to attack speed.>

Four Titans made up the rest of his command. Four replies were given. Maniple Seven was a standard axiom configuration, the three Warlords *Nuntio Dolores*, *Tenebris Vindictae* and *Ultimate Sanction* with the two lighter Reavers *Dust of Ages* and *Ars Bellus* to flank them.

The Legio Solaria were coming in fast. Their drop-ships hit the metal of the dockyard at the limits of safe speed parameters. He felt the impact. Two ships were already down, another incoming. Harrtek's expression soured as the squadron of ships split again, and three more powered off for the moon's surface, denying him glory. The six drop-ships that had diverged earlier were heading off around the further side of the moon, to another section of the interlinked warren of zero-g manufactories and docks that caged it. A standard ruse, to divert attention from the main assault. He paid it no attention. They would either land where there was something to oppose them, or they would not. The other battles were not his concern. His foe was ahead of him.

He wondered if *she* were among the Titans coming for him.

The sublime link with the machine hiccupped at this thought, and *Nuntio Dolores* stumbled a little. Harrtek snarled at his weakness, added his anger to that of the Titan. Multiplied by its arcane technologies, his fury roused the machine to move faster. He did not care. He did nothing to slow it. Queries from the other princeps intruded into the manifold space. Tocsins admonished him. Twitching graphical bars in his helm display and in the space carved out of his imagination slid into red fields. He shut them off.

<Recommend halt and engage at distance. Bring down the drop-ships,> Bennif Durant spoke into Harrtek's mind. He was shield warden, the maniple second, and master of *Tenebris Vindictae*. His word carried weight.

<No glory in that!> thought Harrtek in response. His words never passed his lips, but were translated by the machines plugged into his brain into text and

monotone vox blurts and broadcast to his unit. <Move into close engagement range.>

<You are going too fast, my princeps,> Bennif Durant responded. <We will run into their guns.>

Harrtek sent a bundle of data pointing out the flaws in Durant's argument. The most notable was the large collection of starscrapers that dominated the dockyard's limited horizon. They were bundled so close together they resembled a tableland mesa, and would block all but the first few shots.

<We will close fast before the enemy Legio spreads out into good firing positions.> Harrtek would not give the foe the dignity of their name. <They are a fast Legio, but light. They lack heavy Titans in numbers to match ours. Our advantage lies at close range, where our greater strength will come to bear, and we shall be safe from the attentions of their voidships.>

Durant fell quiet. The other princeps added nothing either verbally or through the maniple infosphere.

He did have a point, thought Harrtek. They could have held back. There was a case to be made for longer-range battle. Legio Solaria's fleet outgunned their own forces, and Maniple Seven were in danger of attracting their attention. The sky burst with the colourful explosions of raging combat.

Terent Harrtek did not want to play a shooting war. He agreed with his Titan's furious spirit. He thought again of grappling with the foe. His hand – *Nuntio Dolores*' arioch power claw – curled in anticipation of melee, rousing his heart and the Titan's reactor.

He did wonder why the Hunters had put down in the moon's sub-complex of orbitals, and not all descended to the surface. Obviously they wished to secure Iridium as a base of operations, but they did not have to do it by taking every last structure around it.

Personally, he would have driven for the moon alone. Any foes that did not retreat from the orbitals could be safely knocked out of the sky from the ground. He calculated a loss of infrastructure of around fifteen per cent for near certain victory for the Legio Solaria. But the Imperial Hunters did not fight that way. They were sentimental, too concerned with preventing deaths. They probably sought to preserve the civilians of the yards around the moon. They had always been weak.

<Form up around me,> he said. <I will be the point of the arrow, you the barbs. We will pierce their skin and when they try to draw us out, we shall rip their flesh apart.>

There was something he saw, a blind spot. He called for assistance from Maniple Eighteen. He could not find them, but they were close. With a second maniple at his side, victory was certain.

He snarled in frustration when the reply came, and he discovered where Maniple Eighteen were.

‘The fools will ambush the ambushers,’ he said to himself. ‘Never take on an enemy on his own terms.’

‘My princeps?’ spoke the primus.

‘Never mind,’ he said into the czella cockpit. ‘Inform Maniple Eighteen that we are moving on their position, to aid in their retreat.’

‘Retreat, my princeps?’

‘They have made a bad decision.’ He slipped back into the manifold. <Do it now.>

Confirmations winged their way through the Legio infosphere. Maniple Eighteen’s reply was predictably furious, but Harrtek was right, he was certain. *Nuntio Dolores* pulled ahead, heading right around the cluster of starscrapers. The maniple stayed in close formation, a Warlord and a Reaver to either side of their leader. The entire exercise occurred in the eerie silence of the void, but inside the manifolds of every Titan the crews’ minds clamoured for the coming fray.

EIGHT

Old Enemies

Esha's body glowed with the ecstasy of holy union. *Domine Ex Venari* moved easily in the low gravity, and she experienced its long, loping strides as if they were her own. Locomotion under low gravity conditions felt deliciously lazy. Fifty metres of metal passed by with every bound.

The Legio fanned out from the drop-ships under a burning sky. Flights of fighter craft sped overhead, driving back attempts by the enemy to attack the Legio Solaria from above. *Metallo Mutandis* and Battlegroup Solaria took up position between the orbitals and the Iridium moon, lashing everything around them with destruction. The False Mechanicum had no formation of sufficient strength to oppose the Adeptus Mechanicus, and the ships were free to concentrate on major defensive positions away from the moon. Already, the three void forts floating near the moon and its sub-network designated as targets for the fleet were coming under concerted attack.

Cold, airless space was the field of battle. Skitarii, thallaxii and attached Legio Cybernetica battle automata were raining down on the orbitals around the moon. None were bound to aid the Imperial Hunters on the surface. Their role was to take the fight inside, subvert the orbital systems, and if possible turn the guns of the great docks on the enemy. On the moon below, mixed formations led by god-engines would be striking out to secure command and control centres. She anticipated these lesser wars would be done quickly. Iridium was mostly in loyalist hands already. She could spare no thought for that now. On the outside

of the docks and processing centres surrounding the moon was where her battle would be decided, engine to engine.

Esha Ani Mohana's reinforced maniple adopted a hunting pattern that Pahkmetris herself would have recognised: Warhound pack ranging in front, Reaver huntresses behind ready to take down prey started by the hounds. Third, Tenth and Sixth Maniples adopted similar formations to either side of her as their drop-ships came down and they walked onto the field of battle in her wake. Second Maniple was first in the hierarchy. The others deferred to her.

The orbital they fought on was the largest over Iridium and was joined to its fellows by a mess of transit ways and structural supports. The purpose of this tangle of metal eluded her. It seemed overly complex for the orbital's role as shipyard and fuel store – counterproductive, even. The Iridium sub-network caging the moon was only a part of the giant lattice of steel, stone, adamantium and energy bonds that orbited Theta-Garmon V. The network centred on the gas giant's equator, spreading far north and south into the tropics. Further stations clustered around the poles and the planet's other moons. The docks were situated further out from the world. Much closer in was a second agglomeration of hydrogen processing decks whose syphons descended deep into the upper atmosphere. Together, they made a fat, broken belt of silver links.

A shiver of premonition passed through her body and mind. A superstitious backworlder would recognise the feeling and make some gesture to ward off the evil eye. But this was holy, from the Machine-God. By primal feeling she processed *Domine Ex Venari*'s auspex input, and this was a warning of incoming engines. There was of course a plethora of light-spun models for her to see on her helm display, and similar could be accessed mentally via the manifold, but visceral emotion was far more natural, far more *right.* She felt the enemy as an arachnid feels her web move, or a felid hears the faint crackle of grass and knows instantly what prey has made it. She smelled the enemy on winds of data.

This was Procon's gift to the Legio of Tigris.

'I am the huntress, you are my mistress of hounds,' she voxed. These were the words that must be said. Ritual demanded them. They remembered the whisper on the wind, the subtle hand signal that brings meat to the table through blood and death. She felt every mind in the maniple intent on her across the maniple infosphere.

'What orders for the hunt, second princeps majoris?' responded Durana Fahl.

'Let slip the dogs,' she said.

Facsimiles of canine howls blared through her soul. She smiled indulgently.

The ritual done, the business of engine war had to be attended to.

'Third Maniple, Tenth Maniple, Sixth Maniple, you walk with us. Will you acquiesce to my command?'

'Aye. Third Maniple names you princeps seniores,' spoke Akali Netra, the princeps majoris of Third.

'As does Sixth.'

'And Tenth. You are hunt leader. You are Second Maniple. You command, we shall follow. Set out the course of the hunt.'

Esha's gratitude touched their minds in reply. The election was another ritual. As commander of Second Maniple, she was the Great Mother's chosen representative. She had automatic right of command when on the field, but to the adepts of the Machine-God, ritual was important. Through the war-cants the bond between human and machine was forged. The division between she and *Domine Ex Venari* closed a little more at this show of respect to their deity.

The forces voted to her were three full-strength venator configuration maniples. Along with her own reinforced group it made for a total of sixteen Warhounds and five Reavers. The disposition they should take was obvious.

'Five engines, single maniple, axiom configuration coming in on bearing one-three-five. The enemy will round the tower cluster ahead of us in six minutes, fourteen seconds. They threaten our major landing zone on this section of the orbital structure. Response – four packs, four hounds each, three wide echelon right, one fall back to sweep wide right. Single concentration hunter group, back line inverse V. Long range primary bombardment, firing advance, hounds to bring home the kill. Elude, encircle, obliterate.' She spoke in a pulsing chant. She spoke the orders, but they were transmitted to her fellows as light speed cascades of data before she had finished speaking.

'Confirmed,' responded the others, Sixth first, the rest following. They understood the commands. The formations were second nature to the engines and their crews.

Ahead the Warhounds had spread out into a single loose crescent, their advanced auspex suites pinging the complex, artificial landscape ahead with the aim of flushing out the foe. At Esha's command they changed configuration. The fan of hunting scout Titans broke up by maniple and clumped into hollow box formations. The Warhound packs from Third, Sixth and Tenth Maniples strung themselves out in an echelon right, with Third Maniple in the lead. Second dropped back from the middle, swung about, and began to run for the end of the line in a long, steep curve. The three Reavers of the other maniples increased

speed. *Domine Ex Venari* and *Steel Huntress* slowed to allow them to catch up. *Steel Huntress* and the Reaver *Broad Spear* made up the tips of an inverted V. *Domine Ex Venari* took the trailing point, a position Esha could easily view the whole engagement from. *Arcadian Might* of Sixth and Netra's *Odercarium* flanked her.

Now close to, the Reavers extended their infospheric network, linking their auspexes together with a flicker of pulsed data squirts that blended the senses of engine and princeps. Information flashed between them. Esha felt herself uplifted again as she took another step on the Machine-God's sacred stair. Joining this wider network she moved closer to her god. Her humanity seemed very far below now, nearly forgotten.

<Sensor anomaly, princeps seniores.> The notification came on a flash of pulsed laser quicker than thought from the Warhound *Howl of Fire* of Third Maniple. Along with the words were cartolithic data, pict and vid. In the systems linked to her mind, it integrated itself seamlessly with data cast from the other scouts.

Esha processed the input instantaneously. Her sisters saw what she saw.

Howl of Fire and its pack mates were approaching a collection of tall, annular buildings in the shadow of the starscrapers: a magnetic forge where metals heated to gaseous states were spun into ship components and flash-cooled, while powerful electromagnets aligned the crystals in the metal to the maker's whim.

It was online, the city-sized emitters blanketing an area forty kilometres square in invisible, electromagnetic fog. If she looked with her human eyes, Esha witnessed the ingenuity of man given form in metal. Three-hundred-metre-tall towers rose in praise of the Machine-God, filling the emptiness of the void and dividing it into useful spaces. Crisp shadow and brilliant metal made an abstract scene. She saw order there. Bright flashes from the ongoing void war glinted on the metal, but could not drive back the shadow between.

If she used anything but the fraction of the electromagnetic spectrum visible to human eyes, she saw blankness.

The perfect place for an ambush.

'Third Maniple hunting pack, pull left immediately,' she voxed, breaking out of the infosphere for a moment. Her mind drew back from *Domine Ex Venari*'s soul. She remembered flesh and blood. She remembered weakness. The Reaver felt her sorrow and its being reached out to embrace Esha in its power once more.

Third Maniple's hunting pack was at the leading edge of the echelon. The

hollow square of Warhounds swung left in perfect coordination. They sent alert signals to the other groups. The packs slowed. To get clear of the dead space, they had to skirt around a field of spherical hydrogen tanks a thousand strong.

'Warhounds slow, but continue. We shall draw them out. Reavers, halt,' thought Esha. The Reavers took a few more unsteady steps in the low gravity. The *Arcadian Might* stumbled, forcing it to fire anchor cables from its upper greaves to bring itself to a stop.

'Princeps seniores?' The minds in the infosphere were nodes of information, bright orbs of light in a sea of data rendered as glittering threads. The princeps' minds were larger than the moderati's, the engine souls biggest of all. No single voice spoke the query. All spoke the query.

'Ready weapons,' she said. 'Maniple packs Sixth, Tenth and Third slow and prepare to scatter.'

The Reavers set themselves against the coming recoil. Gatling blasters, laser blasters and volcano cannons levelled. Bracing pistons engaged. Energy gauges crawled upwards with the building thrum of reactor power draw.

'Weapons are charging,' Omega-6 voxed from the reactor.

'Third Maniple pack, you are too close – draw back from the chem-stores.'

Too late. A Reaver surged from the darkness, chain fist churning. *Howl of Fire* had time to turn and bring its guns to bear before the weapon punched into and through the void shields and cut across the delicate waist-joint of the scout.

The upper half of *Howl of Fire* was thrown free and up, crashing into a hydrogen tank dozens of metres away. Liquified gas boiled off in a geyser kilometres long. The Warhound's reverse-jointed leg section took four more steps before collapsing.

Alarms whooped in the cockpit.

<Engine down,> a flat, machine voice repeated. <Engine down.>

'There's another maniple in the forge, five more engines, a second axiom configuration, split one-four grouping, coming out of the magnetic shadow. They're ambushing us. Fools,' said Kansa Rit of Tenth Maniple.

The enemy Reaver was striding from the kill site, gatling blaster volleying fire at the fleeing Warhounds. Void shields sparked. One of the Warhounds twisted upon its waist, loosing a spear of sun-hot gas from its plasma blastgun. It splashed on the void shield, curling back like a blowtorch flame pressed to metal. The Reaver's first shield flared bright crimson. Light intensity and hue dropped through the spectrum, dark red, darker, more blue creeping into the discharge, until finally it died to purple and guttered out. Sheet lightning flashed.

The shield dropped.

From the dead zone strode four more engines, already firing. Three Warlords and the enemy maniple's second Reaver marched out of the avenues between the magnetic forge's towers. They came to a halt and braced. Their carapaces sparkled as they unleashed a salvo of rockets.

'They are bad at this kind of war,' said Akali Netra. *'They reveal themselves too soon.'*

Esha magnified the image with a thought.

The Death Stalkers had shed their old livery as a serpent sheds its skin. They had kept the dark red and cream colours that had given them a regal appearance in the past, but the balance had changed in favour of the red, and was now accentuated with purple panels. The cream had darkened to the yellowed ivory of old bone. Together, purple, scarlet and bone gave the Titans the appearance of slabs of butchered meat.

She thought quickly. The other axiom maniple would be on them in moments. Even with so many Titans on her side, she did not rate their chances against two battleline units. She had an idea, spectrum-tested the gases spurting from the ruptured tank, and smiled.

The outer hull was breached. Oxygen was leaking from the pressurised sections of the deck below the broken tank. Not much, but enough.

'Warhound packs are clear. Reavers return fire,' thought Esha. 'Fire select seeker arrows on my target. Rocket volley, now.'

The Reavers under Esha's command were equipped with carapace-mounted apocalypse launchers. Exhaust blasted from venting ports as the rockets fired. Seeker arrows were particular to their Legio, a product of their way of war. The missiles burned across the dark, guided by the disembodied brains of human beings. Each missile cost a life to make, to ensure its one, vital task was undertaken correctly.

The rockets slammed into the first rank of the hydrogen tanks at precisely spaced intervals. They exploded with immense violence, each impact triggering a chain reaction that blew up the tanks in sequence until half the field was erupting. The explosion lofted metal high out beyond the reach of the gravity well of moon and orbitals. Fire rushed out, forcing attack craft to take evasive action.

The enemy Reaver was engulfed by the storm of metal and flame. When it rolled back, extinguished by the void, the Reaver was down, void shields offline and struggling to stand. Its chainfist tip skidded on the structure beneath it as it

attempted to force itself upright. Where the hydrogen tanks had been was a mass of twisted metal. The area of devastation was broad, and had opened up an even larger section of the dock's pressurised decks to the open void. Seemingly limitless atmosphere rushed outwards, thick and white as a waterfall run in reverse.

'Third Maniple, double back, avenge your fallen sister.'

The Warhounds obeyed eagerly, wheeling about to strafe the fallen engine with vulcan megabolter fire and lashes of incandescent plasma. The fallen machine fired back in panic, its rockets stripping the shields from one of the Warhounds. The Reaver's maniple mates were quick to target the naked scout, and a hit from a volcano cannon tore off the Warhound's blast gun. The damaged engine fell back under fire, out of the battle, but its sisters continued, riddling the Legio Vulpa machine until it collapsed completely and lay dead, its hull punctured by dozens of smoking wounds.

<Engine kill,> said the machine voice in *Domine Ex Venari*'s cockpit. <Engine kill confirmed.>

Despite the loss of the *Howl of Fire*, Esha felt a surge triumph.

'Tenth and Sixth hunting packs, envelop. Second stay wide, Third join them, outflank and destroy,' she said. The infosphere jittered. The enemy were attempting to disrupt their communications. Tech-priests aboard the *Metallo Mutandis* and the Legio strategic staff on the *Tantamon* and *Artemisia* would be attempting to do the same to the Death Stalkers. Broken communications destroyed the effectiveness of a Legio. Comms disruption was an old trick, and easily countered, but like a customary greeting it had to be carried out.

'Reavers, target enemy maniple, fire on my command.'

She checked the position of the second enemy maniple coming around the tower cluster. They would round it at a position well wide of the blind spot and hydrogen firestorm. They would be easy to hit. Conversely, so would her Reavers. The field was roughly even. Fourteen Warhounds, five Reavers against six Warlords and three Reavers. The Legio Solaria had the numbers, but the power disparity between a scout Titan and engine like a Warlord more than made up for it. Legio Vulpa would outmatch them if they were allowed to join their maniples.

If *she* allowed them.

The enemy maniple were standing steady in the magnetic forge complex, trusting to the confusion of emanations to spoil their foes' aim. Their void shields were as close to each other as they could be, forming a wall of energy,

and they were firing every weapon they had at Esha's group of Reavers. Stripes of coherent light blasted across the space between them. In space, volcano cannons were even deadlier than planetside, suffering no refractive weakening from the atmosphere.

Domine Ex Venari took a solid hit. Alarms wailed. Sparks fountained from an energy buffer as the first shield went down violently. More shots came streaming in from the carapace laser blasters of two Warlords. The first void shield lasted precisely a third of a second. Esha logged that. That was too fast. All across her group, voids were sparking, coming down. In moments they would be suffering real damage. She waited to fire back. Legio Vulpa were aggressive. If they thought their enemy helpless, they would neglect their own defence.

'They do not think we can hit them,' she thought to her comrades. 'We shall prove them wrong.'

Tenth and Sixth Maniples were running obliquely through the storm of atmosphere blasting up through the ruptured skin of the docks. Though obscured, targeting data streamed in from the scouts. The linked minds of engine, servitor and crew digested it effortlessly, turning half-obscured pict glimpses into solid firing solutions. Enhanced targeting images shone in her mind's eye. *Domine Ex Venari* shifted, already bringing its weapons to bear. By now, the Death Stalkers would have slaved their reactors to their weapons systems for maximum destruction, neglecting their shields. They knew no other way.

'Open fire,' she said. 'All weapons.'

The Reavers emptied their rocket pods of missiles in one cataclysmic barrage. The magnetic forges suffered several stray shots. In her machine sight, Esha witnessed loops of intense magnetism lash out, powerful enough to perturb the path of the plasmic gases vomiting from the Titans' weapons. Their discharges bent around themselves into complex knots as one of the towers toppled sideways and crumped to ruin on the surface. More rockets slammed into the void shields of Legio Vulpa. Silent fire burst around them and was sucked away to nothing by the vacuum the instant it appeared. Chimes informed the crew that the enemy were shedding their energy protection under the fury of the attack and were slow to replenish it. The notifications were not needed. Esha felt it as a prickling under her skin.

'Advance!' she commanded. Still firing their energy cannons, the Reavers moved forwards. They planted their feet carefully, legs bent for walking under fire, bracing themselves against the recoil from their guns, their formation

allowing them to fire all of their weapons with ease. Legio Vulpa thought themselves stronger, and stood in the full fury of the Reavers' onslaught. By the way they were adjusting their positions, it seemed they also anticipated that the Imperial Hunters' Warhounds would emerge to attack their rear.

Tenth and Sixth Maniples' hunting packs obliged. They burst through the gases venting from the dock city and came in at a run, all guns blazing. Eight Warhounds were a threat, and the enemy maniple adjusted itself further to this new vector of attack. Their line bent back, the left-hand Reaver turning a full ninety degrees and directing all its fire at the attacking scouts, bringing welcome respite to the Legio Solaria's advancing group.

The situation hung on a thread. Legio Vulpa were inflexible, but their stubbornness made them deadly. Esha pressed ahead aggressively only because she saw little other choice. A single mistake would see her attack plan undone.

This was not the form of war she had been raised to. During the crusade, it was unusual to see more than a single maniple on a battlefield. The services of the Legios were called only to address the gravest threats, the hardest or most intransigent foes. Where the Legios walked, xenos and humans alike trembled. There were societies with greater technical knowledge than the Imperium, but few of them had the industrial might of the rising empire. It was a rare machine that could match a Titan, and the metal gods of Mars had walked invincibly wherever they chose.

Horus and Kelbor-Hal had changed that. When the Fabricator General took the cause of the Warmaster, more than half the Titan Legios had followed him into the madness of betrayal. Now Titans fought Titans, and the effects were devastating. Nothing could have prepared Esha for war like this. In the distant days of the Age of Strife, when the forges of Mars tussled for dominance, then the Titans had traded blows, but all was done to a strict code of war. There was no such restraint in this conflict. Thirty Titans were involved in this battle, and it was reckoned a skirmish by the standards of the day.

One of the charging Warhounds went down in flaming pieces that scattered among the legs of its pack mates and threatened to trip them. The others pounded on, twisting their torsos about to fire as they raced past the enemy maniple. The enemy Titans paced around, keeping their vulnerable rears out of the Warhounds' weapons arcs while raking their assailants with return fire, but the Warhounds were fleet, and ran past out of danger before circling back for another strafing run.

Those Warlords still firing on the Reavers concentrated on the *Odercarium*,

hunt leader of Third Maniple. Las-fire smashed void shields like they were made of glass. No fewer than fifteen lances of energy slammed into its legs simultaneously as the last void blinked out, shattering the locomotors and sending the upper part of the Reaver spinning helplessly off into the void. The crew and engine lived, but were in growing danger from enemy fighter craft as they floated away. Already a retrieval vessel was sailing from out of the vast maw of *Metallo Mutandis*' principal docking slot, tight fusillades of gunfire clearing its way through the press of enemy ships, with servitor attack drones speeding in to escort it.

Esha felt all this information in multiple ways, but she cared only for her targets. Concerted fire from her Reavers hammered down the voids of a Warlord. More cut into its carapace. An explosion ripped through the top of its hull, and the right arm fell slack in its mounting. The triumphant shrills of *Domine Ex Venari*'s autosenses predicted imminent reactor failure. It limped backwards. Seeing their position compromised, the others formed up around their wounded comrade and began to fall back to meet with the approaching maniple.

Now that more fire was directed at the scouts, two more Warhounds were crippled, forcing their withdrawal. One tripped as it fled, its leg shattered; the other sprinted free, dragging its broken inferno cannon behind it.

'We have them,' voxed Esha to her demi-Legio. 'Push forwards. Do not allow them to link up with the second enemy maniple. Third and Second packs, your time is now.'

The enemy fell back, right into the path of Second and Third Maniples' hunting packs. They came stealthily from opposite diagonals, Second emerging round the last of the magnetic forges as the enemy maniple entered the main avenue leading through the complex. It was a risk. Timed wrongly, they would have been wide open to the fire of the coming enemy. But they timed it to perfection.

Hails of bolter fire raked the rear of the leftmost Warlord, leaving rippling splashes on its voids as the rounds were shunted into the warp. With so much warp tech active, the fabric of space itself seemed to ripple, and the combatants danced like reels of vid flimsy projected onto a sheet stirred by a draft.

Esha's Reavers were now close enough to read the nameplates of their foes and see the grisly trophies adorning them. Along the pediments of the grand carapaces were set hundreds of spikes, each fixed with a skull.

'Target Warlord *Omnia Sangui*,' Esha ordered. The Reavers paused, reoriented, and let fly in unison. *Omnia Sangui*'s shields came down with blinding flashes. The Warhounds ranged at the end of the avenue riddled its back with Vulcan fire.

It tried to turn to present the heavier armour of its front to the scouts, but its mighty guns caught on one of the giant forge towers. Bolt rounds firing ten thousand a minute chewed metal to pieces as it tried to drag its limbs free.

<Warning. Warning. Enemy reactor collapse imminent,> spoke the machine voice of the cockpit.

Esha felt it, like a growing heat, a sun rising.

'Fall back,' she said.

The Legio Solaria Reavers came to a slow halt. Locomotor units shuddering, they reversed course. The Warhounds scattered like dogs chased from a carcass.

'Faster!' Esha shouted aloud. 'Warhounds divert all power to the locomotor units. Weapons off line. Run!'

The Reavers walked backwards as quickly as they could. The rising scream of an alarm sang out the collapse of the enemy reactor. Its maniple kin were moving fast to get clear. Plasma gushing from holes all over *Omnia Sangui*'s back bent around the lines of magnetic force emanating from the forge. It was a glorious sight to see, a living idol of the Machine-God wreathed in holy fire.

The Titan slammed a fist into the side of a foundry tower and pushed itself backwards. The head ejected from the body, taking the princeps and primary moderati to safety.

The rest were left to die.

<Critical. Critical. Engine death imminent,> said the czella voice.

The Warlord cracked open like an egg hatching a star. A hemisphere of silent light rushed across the surface, engulfing the towers of the magnetic foundry to half their height. An area a kilometre across was vaporised in an instant. A moment later, a second explosion burst upwards as the Warlord damaged earlier detonated. Blinding light rushed over the Reavers' void shields.

The light faded. *Domine Ex Venari*'s machine eyes recovered before Esha's human sight.

'Two Warlords and a Reaver down for a handful of Warhounds. A good tally, princeps senioris,' said Durana Fahl. *'My respect to you.'*

'It is not over yet,' Esha replied. 'Second enemy maniple incoming.'

The foundry was a wreck. The enemy maniple was falling back as fast as they could, pursued by the Warhounds, but the second enemy maniple's energy signatures were dangerously close.

'Hunting packs, return!' Esha ordered.

The other enemy maniple finally rounded the mass of starscrapers at the centre of the battlefield. They were arrayed for maximum fire spread, and opened up as

soon as they came into range.

There was a Warlord at the centre which Esha recognised, even at ten kilometres distance.

'*Nuntio Dolores*,' she said. 'It's him. The Butcher of Biphex.'

A Warhound of Sixth Maniple took a dozen direct hits and collapsed to the steel ground.

'Fall back now!' she commanded again. 'Get me range on *Nuntio Dolores*. Priority target! Bring it down!'

'That's it. No more. All ammunition depleted in apocalypse launcher,' voxed Nepha Nen. Esha knew this; she felt the voided missile slots as painfully as an empty belly.

'Sunfury and lasblaster, prepare to fire!' she shouted. Her agitation pulled her out of the manifold. *Domine Ex Venari*'s movements lost their smoothness.

'Plasma reactor is undergoing emergency venting, princeps. We have less than twenty per cent capacity available at this time, barely enough to power the locomotor units,' Omega-6 voxed from the reactor.

'Why?' she spat.

'Void shield regeneration,' responded Omega-6.

'Esha, we have multiple target locks,' said Yeha Yeha. 'Harrtek's savages are powering up their volcano cannon. You know he will target you. We have limited opportunity to get out of their fire line.'

She swore loudly, pulling her further out of true union. 'Take us away. Now. Get us behind cover.'

'As you command, mistress.'

The void was filled with Battlegroup Solaria attack craft by now, and so Harrtek's unit did not advance to continue the engagement, but awaited the survivors of Maniple Eighteen before falling back themselves.

Esha kept her eyes on *Nuntio Dolores* until *Domine Ex Venari* had moved into the geometric canyons of a heat sink, and Harrtek was lost to sight.

The battle was over.

NINE

A Passing Home

A short-range heavy lifter dropped *Nuntio Dolores* upon a plain of metal. The Titan stepped free of its portage claws. Giant pistons took the brunt of the impact; it hit the ground walking and strode on towards the Legio Vulpa's temporary home.

The Death Stalkers had taken over the Gardoman Hub, a hive-sized construction facility and once sovereign domain within the greater Theta-Garmon V shipyards. Though it comprised hundreds of interlinked docks and manufactoria, the main body of the hub was a number of cylindrical void units clustered upon a long axis mast thirty kilometres from top to bottom, and encircled about the middle by a broad habitation ring twenty kilometres across. The ring carried a city of some hundred thousand souls. Each of the cylinders housed extensive dockyard facilities. Most of those still in working order were producing materiel for the Warmaster's armies, but those at the centre, where the medial ring was joined to the station axis by a hundred soaring bridges, were now the domain of Legio Vulpa.

Nuntio Dolores paced a broad road delineated by slit lumens that cut across the top of the ring city. Gardoman Hub had taken heavy damage during capture, and the city had borne the brunt of the destruction. Many of its pinnacles were hollowed out. The exterior was riddled with holes. Whole sections of hull plating were peeled back, opening the spaces beneath to the vacuum, and the road ahead of *Nuntio Dolores* was broken by a wide fissure. The lattice of voided decks

beneath the armoured skin glinted like bones in a charnel pit. It was a trap for anything less than a god-machine, but Harrtek drove the Titan onwards, and *Nuntio Dolores* strode over the chasm as easily as a man might cross a crack in the path.

Harrtek fulminated silently within the manifold, his smouldering anger fed by *Nuntio Dolores*' facsimile of rage. The Imperial Hunters had Iridium. Harrtek's had been among the last Titans retrieved.

A dozen kilometres away a whole maniple walked towards another berth, lined up like a family of beasts striding some alien savannah. The distance and the setting made them look small while accentuating the sheer size of the Gardoman Hub, but though they seemed like crawling insects, they moved quickly, and were soon lost to *Nuntio Dolores*' sight.

There was little life left in the city. Horus' Legions had no interest in repairing the harm they had caused. They deployed what was still functioning to resupply, but it was a short-term use. The ruined factories and burned-out habitation zones would remain as they were, perhaps forever, thought Harrtek. If this were the Great Crusade, teams would already be surveying the area, waiting for the moment the enemy was vanquished to enact their repairs and improvements in order to demonstrate to the people the beneficence of the Emperor.

Terent Harrtek doubted a great deal if times like that would come again. When Horus won, the new Imperium would be a very different one to the Emperor's.

Once, maybe, that would have bothered him, but Harrtek had realised some time ago that he did not care. His Legio was an agent of destruction. For too long they had been held back from their purpose by ideologues and empire builders. To see such places broken for their defiance gratified him.

Nuntio Dolores reacted to his thoughts with an approving spike of reactor activity. An indignant message came moments later from the enginseer clade responsible for the war machine's heart, urging Harrtek to more responsible emoting. Harrtek ignored it.

The Titan reached the bottom of one of the bridges linking the ravaged city with the shipyards. Arching high over the ring of blackness for nothing other than aesthetic reasons, it allowed views of the city, the yards and the other bridges. Tall lumen poles warded traffic away from the edges, but there was nothing upon it but the Warlord now. It strode on, towering over the poles, its feet crushing the barriers dividing the road into lanes. The bridge began its downwards journey to the shipyard hub, and presently *Nuntio Dolores* stepped onto the flared collar that encircled the midpoint of the tower docks where the

road went into sealed tubes. In a station by the road a clutch of trams were laid up, the workers they had carried from the city to the docks either enslaved at their work places or dead. *Nuntio Dolores* stepped onto the crystalflex ceiling with malicious intent, crushing it into glittering powder and flattening the trams.

Harrtek laughed darkly. His steersman moved to correct the Titan's path.

<No,> Harrtek thought. <Let *Nuntio Dolores* take his pleasure. He is as frustrated as we are.>

The collar around the shipyards was narrow. The Titan clambered up over service conduits and repellers intended to help convey ship hulls from dock to dock as they were moved to different yard sections. The Gardoman Hub's areas were highly specialised. One part made engines, another shields, another intertial field tuning, and so on. The work of making a void ship was so complex and immense even the hub only produced a few of the millions of components required for a finished vessel. Segments were assembled and launched to be towed elsewhere for further work. Before the Warmaster had come, each area had been ruled by specialised shipwright clans only part controlled by the Mechanicum. They had a reputation for bickering, before order had been fatally imposed. Now things ran a little more smoothly.

Nuntio Dolores approached the dockyard designated for its maniple. Frozen gas broke from interlocking teeth as the immense doors opened into a space as harshly lit as the surface of an airless moon.

'Bring us in to the atmosphere dock,' Harrtek commanded, retreating from the manifold now battle was behind them.

'As you so command, princeps.'

Secutarii auxilia protected by void-hardened augmetics patrolled the decks of the dock. Machine eyes glowed a baleful red from every gantry and companionway. The marks of the New Mechanicum were emblazoned everywhere. Months had been put into the capture of the facility in preparation for the final taking of Theta-Garmon V. The pressurised atmosphere-docks were one of the few spaces upon Theta-Garmon's orbital arrays big enough to accommodate Titans, and only in a few rare places like Gardoman were there enough of them to house a demi-Legio. All the Legio Vulpa god-engines present at Theta-Garmon occupied the centre of the hub, along with their thousands of support troops and staff. The hub's defences had been left intact during the attack, at the cost of thousands of lives, as had the outer docking spars where the gargantuan spacecraft needed to transport the Legio lay at anchor. Every army needed a camp. A Titan Legio was no different, though planning for its

accommodation required a little more forethought than most.

Nuntio Dolores walked along a road painted recently upon the deck plating. Bare metal gleamed in the light of arc-lumens where spacecraft construction equipment had been cut out to make space for the god-machines. Although immense, with all their mechanisms in place the atmosphere docks would have been too cramped for the god-machines to move.

Four engines stood already in the rearming bays set up along the edges of the refashioned facility. Repair drones and Mechanicum teams were at work all over them. A rail-mounted crane dragged a piece of armour six metres wide along the ceiling towards the Reaver *Dust of Ages*. It had attracted fire from the enemy fleet and taken damage to its left arm as the maniple withdrew. The damaged section had been removed, and a new shoulder joint already fitted. The broken remains of its arm lay on the flat bed of a magnahauler by its feet, ready to be taken away for scrap.

'The magi are working fast – we are expected to re-enter the fray soon,' said Harrtek to himself. Through *Nuntio Dolores*' staring eyes he looked upon a world of silent industry. The dock had yet to refill with atmosphere.

'Docking station one hundred metres and closing.'

'Moderati oratorius, announce our battle tally to Legio command. Moderati steersman, begin manoeuvres, bring us in.' Harrtek lived for battle, and had no patience for the tedious task of matching the Titan to its service cradle, so he left it to his crew to move the giant machine into position. A series of tiny steps and minute course adjustments saw the machine edge its way into the berth. Forced to move in such close confines and to so close a degree of accuracy, *Nuntio Dolores* lost its warrior's grace and became a clumsy, juddering piece of heavy machinery.

Harrtek let his consciousness slip out of the Warlord's mental clasp, far enough that the input of his natural senses overwrote the impressions flooding his mind from the Titan's autosenses and augury units. He was stiff, his mortal body not having moved while he communed with the machine. When he blinked, he was surprised at the movement in his face. The unnatural feeling of the flesh passed. The memory of the engine's numb, metal body, which had seemed far more real than the one he had been born with, faded away. Even after all this time, his bond with *Nuntio Dolores* felt fanciful when he was not connected to the MIU, like a pharmacologically induced dream.

It was unsatisfactory. Harrtek's Legio lived to perfect the bond with their machines. He craved more. *Nuntio Dolores* responded to his thoughts with a

minor spike in its secondary systems. The machine-spirit was welcoming. It desired to share its power with him forever. It called him back.

He let his eyes refocus. He needed to get out of the machine before the machine got too far into him. Perfect union was laudable, but it came with a price. A headache was already building behind his eyes. The pain came quicker after every disconnection.

Red war-light suffused the head. The czella of the Titan was massive, as befitted its immense body, but so much of it was taken up by systems and equipment there was little space for the crew.

In the rear wall new niches harboured polished skulls, each one inscribed with the manner of its earning. Every skull in this grisly record of victory represented an engine kill. Where possible, an enemy crew member was retrieved and their head taken. Where not, frankly, any skull would do. It was the presence of the skull that mattered, not whose it was, or so the Apostle Vorrjuk Kraal had said. From his position Harrtek could not see the trophies, but he felt their cold, wide glares burning into the back of his neck. Soon, a new skull would join them. It was pitiful, really. A single Warhound. Nothing to celebrate.

At least the deathblow had been delivered by his hand and the curs of Maniple Eighteen would hark to his wisdom more closely in future.

A series of clunks and rattles from outside heralded their final arrival. A dull boom as the docking umbilicus snaked up to the rear and clamped itself in place was the signal to disembark.

'Power down reactor. Summon the enginseers,' he said aloud.

Harrtek cut the link to *Nuntio Dolores*' bellicose soul. Without its anger smouldering in the back of his mind his head should have felt clearer, but if anything his own fury exceeded that of the machine. By the time he had unclasped the heavy helmet from his tall armoured bevor he was seething. He was not entirely sure why.

'Rest. Feed,' he commanded his crew. 'There will be no days of idleness to come.' He dipped two fingers into a flask of blood by his command chair and dragged them down his face, marking himself with the sign of a recent kill. He flicked more over his crews.

'Honour. Glory. You did well today. If you see my anger, fear not – blame Maniple Eighteen's recklessness.'

They saluted but did not respond. No doubt they counted themselves lucky. Harrtek's punishments were growing harsher.

As was his right, Harrtek departed the head first, proceeding through its flexible

metal neck, down cramped stairs past the reactor chamber and out to the access portal in the back. The gates ground open at his approach, splitting down the middle of the grim opus machina adorning the doors' inner faces, and revealing the extendible plastek corridor that connected the machine to the dock's interior. In the passage a small escort of four augmentatii stood to attention, their multiple enhancements allowing them to maintain an immobility that an unaltered human could not mimic. Upon their shoulder plates and helms were the badges of the Legio, and their long coats were the same red, bone and bruised purple of the Titans. They were Legio Vulpa's property, flesh and steel, entirely separate from the hordes of tech-thralls and half-men who served the wider New Mechanicum.

Between them Harrtek's servant Casson waited for him, a half-smile on his face. His uniform was immaculate. Too clean in the grubby confines of the umbilicus, it was almost an insult to Harrtek's post-battle dishevelment. Casson saluted, and held out a warm, damp towel to his master. Harrtek snatched it from the smaller man's hand and wiped the grime of combat from his face and hair. The towel came away black with oil and sweat, smeared with red from his victory stripes.

In the light, Harrtek appeared ghoulish. Once he had been a handsome man, but he had changed. His face was gaunt. Aquiline cheekbones had become razors pressing against his skin from beneath, so hard it looked like they were about to part it. His thick black hair had started to fall out in clumps. He was too vain to shave it off, but brushed it over the bald spots. It fooled no one, least of all himself. Deep purple bruising almost as dark as the colours of his Titan surrounded his eyes, and his eyelids were inflamed. Only his eyes were as they had been, a blue so deep they were almost as dark as lapis. He had been complimented on them by more women than he could remember. They alone remained beautiful.

He had come to hate his eyes for reminding him of what he had been. Victory was a fleeting savour, no matter how great. When the adrenaline was spent and the glory faded, there came a point when he would look upon his ageing face in a mirror, and his youthful eyes would look back in mockery at him. Victory is nothing, they seemed to say. Secretly, he feared they were right, and that he had given up something precious in exchange for hollow power.

'Congratulations on your kill, my lord,' said Casson.

Harrtek threw the towel back at him. The man was too impertinent by half. There was a half-smile underneath everything he said. Harrtek's snarling words echoed behind the bevor hiding his mouth.

‘A Warhound. Nothing. Not even a Reaver. I want a Warlord or a Nemesis. What honour is there in besting so feeble an engine? We lost, Casson. The Hunters have Iridium. This whole world was supposed to have been taken. A war of three years finished in a week. That was the plan, and we have failed.’

Casson bowed. ‘Whatever the outcome, you acquitted yourself well, my lord.’

‘The others will call me out for cowardice, mark my words,’ he said.

‘Retreat was the only option.’

‘And what do you know about it?’ said Harrtek dangerously.

Casson bowed again. Harrtek stared at him. Casson had been with him for, how long? He couldn’t really remember. Since Barcan’s World? Maybe before? When he tried to think about it, Casson seemed to have always been there. He was a secretive fellow, constantly about some business or other, and the way the other *duluz* acted towards him perturbed Harrtek sometimes – too respectful. But Casson was useful, there was no denying that.

‘I have your quarters prepared,’ Casson said smoothly. ‘You may cleanse yourself there, and take refreshment.’

Air hissed from the edges of the umbilicus where the seal clamped imperfectly to the Titan. Harrtek glanced at it in disgust. The sound aggravated the pain in his skull.

‘The station is not yet fully adapted for our use, my lord,’ said Casson. ‘But you will find your household well accommodated. I swear on my life.’

‘One day, I will hold you to that pledge, Casson,’ growled Harrtek.

‘There will be no need today, princeps majoris.’

Harrtek nodded once at him. Casson bowed his head again and held out his hand.

‘This way.’

Casson led him on. The augmentatii fell wordlessly into step behind Harrtek. They walked for a few minutes before Harrtek broke the silence.

‘I saw her,’ he said abruptly.

‘My lord?’ Casson raised an eyebrow in query.

‘Don’t play the fool – when else do I speak this way? About whom else?’ he snapped. He was so angry. It felt ridiculous. He forced himself to calm, slowed his breathing, but that did not stop the hammering of his pulse behind his eyes. ‘The Legio Solaria have come into the cluster. They are here, at Theta-Garmon Five. Today, I fought them, and she was there at the front. Esha Ani Mohana.’

Casson did not reply. Harrtek grunted but let it be. He was taken through a warren of cramped corridors. The dock’s architects had never expected such

vaunted personages as Terent Harrtek to grace its ways. They were in a realm of menials and thralls. Only when they reached a corridor designed to allow heavy classes of servitors room to operate freely did the spaces open up. Nowhere was the complex anything other than utilitarian. Everything was painted a sickly green; hazard stripes and the stamp of the machina opus were the extent of its decoration.

Casson took him from the supply corridor back into the tighter spaces of the dock. It took an amount of careful movement for Harrtek not to launch himself into the low ceilings in the minimal gravity, reminding him of *Nuntio Dolores* walking in the void. The memory sparked an urge in him to join the Titan again.

'By Terra, life gets more dismal with every damn engagement,' said Harrtek, ducking through a door designed in the most primitive way to remain airtight in case of hull breach. A small lip-sill provided space for a rubber seal that ran all around the door, allowing it to be dogged shut against atmospheric leaks with a manual lever. With his inflexible metal collar clamped around his neck, Harrtek struggled to get through.

'This is a shortcut, my lord. We will soon be there.'

No sooner had Casson spoken than they emerged into an area more conducive to easy movement. The corridor there was white, with rough steel floors painted red. Casson stopped and gestured at one of several thick doors set into the wall. This one was sufficiently sized to walk through without difficulty, and servitor operated. A machine monotone announced Harrtek's rank and name as he approached, and the door rolled back into the wall.

'Not bad, Casson,' Harrtek said as he took in the room.

It was no palace, but the quarters were large enough for a few items of furniture, and a separate ablutorial off to the left. Casson had hung Harrtek's trophy flag upon the wall, a patchwork of small cloth squares stitched together, each one taken from the banners of a Titan slain by his maniple. This was his custom before the skull rack was installed in *Nuntio Dolores*, and he preferred it. Food was laid out on the table. Some of it was even fresh; fruit and vegetables rested among the cubes of reconstituted nutrient and synth meat.

'Not bad at all.' Harrtek stepped into the room. He turned around, barring his servant's way as he was about to follow.

'Do you wish help changing, sir?'

The pressure of Harrtek's headache pushed mercilessly at the back of his eyes. It was all he could do not to scream into Casson's face.

'I'll call you if I need you,' he said with enforced calm.

‘As you wish.’

Casson departed. Two of the augmentatii took sentry outside the door. The others turned smartly about and marched away without any form of acknowledgement. Harrtek rested his head against the cool metal of the station until the clang of their feet had receded into the distance. A servant bustled past. His questioning, sidelong glance gave Harrtek the energy to retreat fully into his new quarters.

Harrtek keyed the door shut and hung his head.

He rubbed his lank hair. The sensation soothed him until his fingers brushed against the input ports burrowed through the bone of his skull. Then the headache resurged, emanating in cold waves from his occiput. His nails caught on something around the port. A scab. He picked at it until a small, sharper pain overlaid the migraine.

When he held his fingers up to his face, they were smeared with thin blood.

‘God of war, save me from peace,’ he murmured. He was drained mentally and physically. Controlling *Nuntio Dolores* was getting harder. The long bond between them should have made it easier as the machine-spirit moulded itself ever more to his imprint, and indeed it had once been so, but recently it felt as if the Titan was starting to fight him.

‘Peace,’ he said again. The quiet made his headache worse. His mouth was dry. The fruit tempted him.

Abruptly, he tore at his uniform. His brass collar piece had to come off first. The whole thing was cast in one part and sealed to the uniform with bolts and strips of magnetic plastek. After a few seconds of angry yanking, he remembered himself, keyed the adhesion off, and fiddled with shaking hands at the release nuts until the cumbersome thing was free. The job of removal was difficult without aid, but the thought of anyone near him at that moment made him want to scream.

He shook away an image of himself throttling the life from Casson.

He lifted the command collar awkwardly over his head and dropped it carelessly onto the bed. His stomach lurched as it rebounded on the mattress and threatened to fall to the floor, but the piece of valuable technology wobbled to a halt at the edge. Status lumens around the collar blinked red. He stared at them until the redness bled out from the lights and stained the room a bloody shade. He screwed up his eyes. So soon after the battle and he needed to fight again. There was no outlet without war, nothing to vent his violence upon. He needed to kill, he needed to rend, he needed…

‘You need to calm down,’ he told himself. He took a deep breath, whispered silent mantras learned long ago to calm the spirit when joining with a Titan. They helped a little. He opened his eyes.

Scribed around the collar’s edge were the sacred marks of the god of war – good luck, he had been told, especially for so martial an order as the Legio Vulpa, so he had accepted their engraving as he accepted so much else: without thought beyond a vicious amusement that it would offend the Emperor. Wondrous at first, the gods’ existence had become mundane. The galaxy was crammed with all manner of bizarre things. Gods did not seem out of place. The marks crawled in his vision. *The Emperor is a liar* they seemed to read, though in truth he did not understand what they said. That made him angrier still. The Legio had been outraged by the so-called Master of Mankind’s duplicity, his lies about the nature of the warp and the existence of the creatures within. They had added their banners to the Warmaster’s cause as soon as the truth was revealed to them by Vorrjuk Kraal.

Fierce martial pride rose in his chest, and a nervous energy suffused him, urging him to act immediately. He paced, stopped, started pacing again. From afar he thought he heard the sounding of brazen horns calling him to battle.

‘No,’ he said. ‘Rest.’

He tore at his uniform again, tugging it from himself and strewing the heavy plasticised fabric across the floor, then the fatigues underneath, until he stood naked and affronted by his own stink.

The reek had him pulling a face. A rich and meaty war sweat. Somehow the animal nature of his own body brought him back down to earth. He stooped. He was suddenly very tired.

He regretted leaving the connection with the Titan; at least there his own anger was lost within its greater fury. He should have stayed within. As *Nuntio Dolores* he was strong. As a man he was weak. He could request permanent bonding via tank or cyberlinkage, but the thought filled him with irrational fear. As much as he wanted to creep back into his bond with *Nuntio Dolores,* he was glad to be out of it for a while.

Calm, he thought. Calm. He took another deep, shuddering breath that felt dangerously close to a sob. He was conflicted. He was not yet so fatigued by the war that he was blind to the contradictory nature of his emotions, but he was close. Constant fighting would wear him away, layer by layer, until there was only the need to fight left. He could see it coming.

‘Combat stimm withdrawal,’ he told himself. The sticky mouth, the gritty eyes,

the headache and the mild hallucinations were all symptoms. He took the drugs as a matter of course. There was no time to rest. They helped.

He stepped into the ablutorial. There was a shower head mounted directly over the waste throne. He slammed his hand against the water release button with unnecessary force. A warm gush of rust-tainted water sprayed over his head. It smelled of metal, and tasted of blood. Nevertheless, the eighty seconds of water flow his status allowed was sublime, and though the headache did not recede, some degree of his tension flowed away with the oil and sweat.

He had seen her again, after all this time. He had expected thinking of Esha would make him angrier still, but instead he felt a numb sadness. There was a time once when they were friends, nearly something more.

That was long ago, and a decade of war and hatred now lay between them.

Terent Harrtek, Princeps majoris Nuntio Dolores

TEN

Two Legios

‘There is a Legio that is composed entirely of women. Can you imagine such a thing?’

That was the first Terent Harrtek had heard of the Legio Solaria. It had been Averna who told him, a princeps he respected well past the moment he had to kill her. Her loss was a shame, for she was an able warrior and a good friend, but she would not renounce her vows to the Emperor, and so she and her Titan had died under *Nuntio Dolores*’ guns.

All that had come later.

Fate had its sense of humour. Before Averna mentioned the Legio Solaria, Harrtek knew next to nothing of them. Not long after Averna had said those words, an emissary mission of the Legio Solaria arrived at Legio Vulpa’s field fortress on the newly compliant Barcan’s World.

The emissary was a woman, of course.

Within hours of her arrival, Harrtek learned the two Legios were to fight alongside each other. Although they were enjoined to fight together by the primarch Ferrus Manus, bringing two Legios to walk side by side was not so simple as ordering it to be so. Inter-Legio alliance necessitated negotiations of the most complex sort. There were days of quibbling. Everything from orders of precedence in parade, seniority of command in mixed battlegroups, priority of supply, and hierarchies in intermingled techno-clades were up for negotiation. There was a pecking order in the Collegia Titanica. Militaris Grade mattered less

than an order's date of patent; older generally trumped bigger. But the relative numbers of god-machines and the size and power of a Legio's warden domains were important too. Like everything the Martians did, the relative rank of one Legio in regard to another was mind-numbingly complex, and despite the application of numerous algorithms, or maybe because of their opaqueness, so much of it was subjective. The princeps of a god-engine valued pride over all other vices, and it forced him to trumpet his own virtues loudly.

The princeps could not get involved themselves if oil and blood were not to be shed. Matters of cooperation were arranged by the tech-priests of the Legios, usually with an intermediary drawn from a third-party forge world. Unfortunately, technis hierarchy was squared in complexity when two forge worlds dealt with one another, and multiplied to the power of all egos involved where there were three. Talks were conducted in furiously paced binharic behind closed doors.

As in all matters, the Mechanicum was jealous of its secrets. The tech-priests assiduously projected an air of unity for fear of revealing their internal fractions to the overlords of Terra. Nowhere was this compact of unity more important than when presenting their mightiest assets of war to outsiders. It was an unspoken rule, adhered to by all factions whether avowed worshippers of the Emperor as Omnissiah or deeply sceptical of the same: the Legios had to appear unified, and ready to march to Mars' command.

This was what the Martians euphemistically called 'informational rerouting around non-definable factual parameters'. Or a lie, as more prosaic beings would name it.

Therefore, very few people outside of the Mechanicum priesthood were permitted to see any of the ruthless horse trading that underpinned Legio alliances, and that included the Titan crews.

For the princeps and moderati, who were closer to humanity than the priests were, there was a feast. The princeps were foremost a martial order, so tales of victory and notable escapades were exchanged, delivered in the usual mode by specially modified cyber-bards.

Esha Ani Mohana had been in the delegation, and it was during the Moment of Exchange before the feast that Terent Harrtek first met her. Harrtek spotted her as soon as she walked in. She stood out among the thirty-strong cadre of Solaria princeps like a candle in the dark. She had the bearing of an apex predator, lean and graceful, her killing power hidden by a languidness that he knew, as a killer himself, could be cast aside in the blink of an eye. Her smiles flashed fangs.

Death could come unexpectedly from a woman like that. She intrigued him. He was attracted to her immediately.

During the Moment of Exchange, all present were permitted to speak with whomever they chose while the tech-lords of the Legio cults publicly read their opening positions to each other. Closed negotiations would commence soon after. For the priesthood it was a guard against disingenuity, while the accompanying social ritual was supposed to help bring the two Legios together.

To begin with there was an uneasy detente. The Death Stalkers watched their guests suspiciously. The Imperial Hunters provoked them with secret smiles.

Harrtek was the boldest. He broke the silence, and marched up to Esha Ani Mohana.

'You are Esha Ani Mohana,' he stated. He saluted her with a full aquila, hands splayed across his chest. Her returning smile was condescending. She forwent the salute and clicked her heels instead.

'I am. Princeps of *Bestia Est*,' she said.

'The Beast Is,' said Terent Harrtek, translating the High Gothic into the common speech. 'You are no beast. You look like a huntress.'

'That is because I am,' she said with a confident smile. 'We all are, of course.' Her smile took on elements of flirtation, and mockery. 'We *are* the Imperial Hunters.'

The women with her laughed.

'What is the class of your Titan?' he said.

Her forehead wrinkled between raised eyebrows. 'This is fine introduction,' she said. 'I heard the lords of your Legio never learn the identities of their moderati, but I thought a princeps might offer his name in greeting to another commander.'

Harrtek tensed. The situation was not proceeding as he had planned. Legio Vulpa was a forthright order: assess the target, advance and destroy. Esha slipped aside from the first volley of conversation like gun smoke on a breeze. He was gladdened when others approached their opposite numbers, and began making their own introductions. Some princeps pledged vows of support to their would-be allies, others simply bragged about their prowess. Soon the room was abuzz with human and machine speech, covering Harrtek's discomfiture.

'I apologise,' he said, the words coming hard to him. 'I am Terent Harrtek, princeps of *Nuntio Dolores*.'

'The Herald of Sorrow.' She flashed another wounding smile. 'Do you live up to your Titan's name?'

His own expression set hard. 'So my enemies say, in the moments before their

deaths.'

'How impressive.' She looked about herself, amused at the display around her. The Hunters were more at ease than their hosts, but tentative friendships were budding. The line of green and dark-red uniforms was beginning to mingle, two sets of particles mixed by inevitable social physics. 'Like this hall. It is beautiful, if a little brutal in design. Each to their own, I suppose.'

'This is only a field base,' he said.

She nodded. 'It is mightier than our order's base fortress. But then, we are swift runners, we live on the wind.' She smiled again. He was not entirely sure she was joking. 'You are a fearsome order, so I hear.' She smiled. 'So then, is it true?'

'What?'

'What I heard, that you do not learn your crews' names?'

He nodded.

'It is true. Crewing a Titan requires men of honour. Bravery, loyalty, decisiveness, these are the skills our Legio demands of every member of its Titan crews. We princeps are more than those we command. We are the minds of the god-engines. The moderati are components in the engine. They are beneath us.'

'You speak of them like they are servitors.'

'Servitors have no will of their own. Our moderati understand our code – they are part of it. From their ranks we raise new princeps. They fight harder to be granted their own command. The day they cast off their mask and are accepted into our ranks is one of great honour.'

'You were a moderati once?'

'I was. Every princeps was. Were you?'

'Of course.'

'Of course,' he echoed. 'Then answer this,' he said. 'When you were a moderati, did you seek to impose your view upon the princeps? Did you question his orders? Did you act of your own accord?'

'Her orders,' corrected Esha.

'Hers. His. It doesn't matter.' He shrugged. 'Only resolve matters. Affection does not matter. Personal ties are an encumbrance. I do not make friends with my pistol. To be a moderati is to be a part of a god-machine, but to be a princeps is to *be* one. The chance for command is enough of an honour for any man. They need no more.'

'An interesting perspective,' she said. 'What of the mind impulse unit? When you link with your engines, do you not touch minds?'

‘That is the nature of the mechanism,’ he said, allowing himself a little of his own condescension.

‘Then you must know something of your crew.’

‘Nothing at all,’ he said. ‘We undergo rigorous training to banish all extraneous thought. Only mental activity pertaining to the successful prosecution of war is permitted. You experience the machine trance?’

‘Yes.’

‘Not like we do,’ he said. ‘Our mental techniques purify it. We excel at union. When our minds mingle over the interface we achieve a greater unity with our Titans than other Legios. If we did not, then every personal feeling, all the envies and passions and the doubts men feel would poison the blessedness of psycho-mechanical congregation, and the machine would suffer. The mission would suffer. With our humanity separated, we are free to abandon the weakness of the flesh. We embrace the full fury of the god-engines, and wreak the destruction that must be done without either doubt or regret.’ He was speaking as fervently as one of the Legio tech-priests. She laughed at him for it, and his hackles rose.

‘You take this all too lightly, madam. By banishing humanity we are one with the machine. Can you say the same?’

‘Forgive me,’ she said. ‘I am insulting your honour, and I do not mean to. It is just that your way is so different to ours. Actually, our methods are completely opposed.’ She plucked a glass of sparkling wine from a server’s plate and sipped it. ‘We all know each other deeply. We hold nothing back. We share everything. That way, there are no difficulties in achieving a deep mind blend. We cannot surprise each other because we know all there is to know about one another. We know how we will react, and all our strengths and weaknesses. We live together and hunt together. Our bonds lessen the pain of withdrawal from the machine when we are not at war.’

‘I hear you lie with each other,’ he scoffed.

‘We do,’ she said, and glanced at him. ‘A human body has its needs. Like I said, we share everything.’

Harrtek noted how smoothly the Imperial Hunters moved. They slid between the stolid Death Stalkers as water slides through reeds. If their Titans moved as easily as the women, perhaps their way of battle had something to recommend it. His own sense of superiority prevented him from saying so.

‘Do you not indulge the flesh?’ she asked. ‘We are as we are because the Machine-God decreed it. The mechanisms of bodily pleasure are his gift.’

‘Sometimes,’ Harrtek admitted. He felt ashamed. He had that yearning. He felt

it for her, right then. ‘It is a weakness I do my best to control. It interferes with the state of perfect union.’

‘It is not a weakness,’ said Esha. ‘Nor is it a right or an obligation as others maintain, but it is an opportunity. You feel shame for no reason. No permanent attachments are allowed, of course,’ she went on, either oblivious to his rising passion or deliberately snubbing it. ‘That would bring complications, but we believe all of human nature must be embraced if the machine is to have balance.’ She looked at him. ‘Your Legio has a reputation for cruelty. We do not. Perhaps your methodology separates you too much from mankind.’

‘Yours has a reputation for cravenness,’ he said back.

He was disappointed when she did not take offence. ‘It might look that way, but our tactics are sound. Our engine loss to victory ratio is better than all but three other Legios.’ She stared at him provocatively, and repeated herself for emphasis. ‘Only three other of all the orders of the Collegia Titanica can claim to lose fewer god-engines per battle than we do. We strike, we fall back, we bleed the enemy’s strength. When the time is right, we deliver the deathblow. Your order walks forwards, levelling everything that is found in front of it. It is simplistic. Some might say you are too much in thrall to the machine-spirits of your Titans.’

‘Some might die if they said so.’

‘Ah, so it makes you angry that I speak so. Do you see?’ she said. She drank more of her wine. ‘That is exactly what I am talking about. We are a synthesis, humanity and machine.’ She laced her fingers together around the glass and rocked her hands back and forth. ‘The human is essential to the wellbeing of the machine. It cannot be denied that mankind, as a part of the Machina Cosma, is holy in itself. The form of the engines mimics that of holy humanity. This,’ she swept her hand down her body, ‘trunk, head, limbs – it is the form ordained by the Machine-God. If the form were unimportant, the engines we make would be different. But by making them in our own image, we make them in his. If we deny our own humanity, we deny part of our god’s plan. We deny him.’

‘I could introduce you to a hundred tech-priests who would disagree with you.’

‘And I could find a hundred who would agree with me,’ she said. ‘There is room for every manner of worship in the cult, but some are closer to the Machine-God’s intent than others.’

He grunted aggressively. A member of his own Legio would have been silenced, but she challenged him.

‘That’s not to your liking?’ she said.

He laughed himself. Some of his annoyance boiled off with it. ‘Sometimes I wish for a little more clarity from our priests and magi,’ he said. ‘Battle is simple. Theology annoys me. If that offends you, we have little to talk about.’

‘Very little offends me,’ Esha said.

‘That is good.’ Despite her attitude, he was feeling more comfortable. He found her candour refreshing. ‘It is good to be above matters of little importance. All this chatter is of no consequence.’ He paused. ‘Might I show you what is?’

Her eyes gleamed. She guessed at what he offered, perhaps both parts of it. ‘You would allow me to see Legio Vulpa’s engines?’

‘There will be a formal display tomorrow, but you can see them now, if you like, without the distraction of the others.’

‘Isn’t there some sort of ceremony to come?’

‘The Blooding?’ said Harrtek. ‘A little vitae is spilled and drawn upon the oath plate of our Legio. Nothing you will regret missing. We’ll be back in time for the feast and the exchange of legends.’

‘Then I would like very much to see the engines,’ she said. She drained her glass and placed it on a table.

He looked around himself. He motioned to her, extending his hand around her back to shepherd her through the throng. He was surprised when she turned and took hold of it. Her hand was tiny in his, and cool, as if she had come in from a long spell outdoors.

‘This way,’ he said.

He led her through the crowd, behind long drapes filling the gaps between the pillars of the hall’s colonnade. In the closed-off corridor made by the curtains it was darker, and the rising chatter between the two Legios muffled. Electro flambeaux gave off dancing light but no heat, and it was cool away from the press of bodies. A duluz menial carrying a huge ewer of wine bustled past, his eyes averted from his betters. Harrtek paid him no more heed than he would a stone.

Through the curtained-off space he led her, past high windows of heat-shocked crystal looking out over the conquered world. The stone of the walls was freshly cut, and the minerals twinkled in the false firelight. Legio Vulpa had claimed the highest mountain for their lair, the home of gods in the world’s overthrown creed. A bold statement to imprint the Imperial Truth on the planet for all time. Gods of metal to banish those of make-believe.

A squat, circular steel door, newly made and still gleaming, filled the middle of the hall’s narrower wall. Harrtek spoke to Esha. He was reluctant to release her

hand, but did so.

'Look away, please.'

He half expected her to refuse, but she obliged. On the far side of the curtains the volume of chatter was rising, bragging and boasting, not all of it good-natured. Harrtek approached the door. Before he breathed upon its hidden gene-sensors, he checked the huntress was still looking away.

Locks clanked all around the door and it rolled aside.

'You are careful,' she said, turning back to face him.

'You aren't? I take you to the underworld. Such passages are never opened lightly.'

They passed into a long tubular corridor leading down into the mountain. Every part of its surface apart from the floor was lined with soft plastek pipes and bundled cables. There was no door at the far end. The corridor simply opened into a larger space. The quality of sound and movement of air suggested great volume.

They passed between a pair of guards hidden in sentry holes. The guards came alert as soon as the couple tripped their detection beams and emerged like figures in an elaborate clock.

Harrtek waved a hand. They read the ident marker embedded in his wrist, and retreated into their alcoves without a word. The challenge done, Esha and Harrtek stepped out into Legio Vulpa's Hall of Armaments.

Seventy Titans stood in bays carved into the flesh of the mountain like forgotten deities unearthed from an underground tomb. They faced each other over a wide service road, arranged by size rather than maniple. Most had been refitted and repaired after the compliance, although half a dozen were cocooned by repair scaffolds. Limbs protruded from behind the sheeting covering the towers, so that they looked like giant patients in a medicae bay prepared for surgery.

The remainder stood proudly in full view. Their banners had been washed and repaired, and fresh honours stitched into them. The deep red and cream of their livery gleamed with polish. The metallic edgings of their armour plates were clean, buffed to a high shine. At the very far end of the hall, the gates were open and sunlight shone through their high arch, so distant and bright no detail of the outside was visible through the glare. The Titans looked like they were the guardians of a heavenly portal.

Harrtek stopped. 'Look upon this hall and halt a while. What generations will come after, and see these fortresses we make and wonder, as we wonder at the

ruins of xenos empires gone before, and say, "What giants once stood here?"'

'Very poetic,' she said. She took a few steps ahead of him, neck craned, eyes taking in every detail.

'They are not my lines. I quote one of the remembrancers accompanying the fleet,' said Harrtek. 'He has written volumes of verse about the Legio, but that line sticks with me.'

'You do not think the histories will tell those of the future exactly what they need to know?' she asked.

'No empire lasts forever. Everything is undone. Time fells even the gods. Poetry tells truths better than history.'

'There are no gods but the one who is three,' she said, looking back at him.

'Figuratively speaking,' he said, becoming irritated that she did not share his awe at the sight of his Legio's engines, or his passion for the verse.

She turned to face him. 'Then why do you fight, if our Imperium will one day fail?'

'For honour,' he said. 'For glory. I was born to fight. It is my purpose to bring ruin to the Emperor's enemies. Destruction has a beauty of its own. I follow the path of the Machina Cosma. The universe itself works relentlessly to render the complex simple in preparation for the great reforging. I am a holy agent of entropy.'

'Glory and honour are fleeting,' she said. 'They die with the man who prizes them.'

'That is the nature of entropy,' he agreed.

'Entropy is to be resisted,' she said.

He moved his hand in a way that meant neither yes nor no. 'Why do you fight?' he asked.

She shrugged. 'For the future, and the hope that perhaps our species might succeed where others have not. I do not believe in the tenets of the Entropic Creed.'

'It is a sensible philosophy.'

'It is a challenge set us by the Machine-God. What is technology but the creation of complexity from the decaying system of the universe?'

Moisture dripped from somewhere high overhead. A large puddle had gathered in the road. Each drip broke the reflections of the god-machines into rings, and sent a glittering spray of droplets dancing in the sunlight blazing from outside.

'Why is it that you have only women in your Legio?'

Esha smiled. 'You've been wanting to know that since you greeted me.'

‘I have.’

‘It is simply our custom.’

‘Then tell me where this custom comes from.’

‘It is just a custom.’

Harrtek struggled to maintain his humour. He was equally as irritated as he was attracted to this strange woman, and he desired to know.

‘Humour me,’ he said. ‘Please.’ Harrtek hardly ever said please. He tasted the word. It fit his mouth poorly.

‘Very well,’ she said. She put her hands behind her back in a way that suggested she took the stance habitually, and looked back over Vulpa’s Titans. ‘The founding mothers of our order were of the Knightly house of Vi, one of several found on the planet Procon.’

‘Never heard of it,’ said Harrtek.

‘You are hearing of it now,’ she said teasingly.

The conflict of desire and annoyance in Harrtek intensified.

‘All my kind hail from there ultimately,’ said Esha. She walked on through the silence of the hall, looking over at the gigantic shapes of the war engines as if she were appraising beasts of burden in a back-world market. Harrtek followed. Their echoing footsteps set up an uneasy syncopation, always threatening to fall out of rhythm. ‘The Mechanicum came to Procon not long after the first iterators visited. The promises of the Imperium were vague. Those of the Martians more concrete, shall we say.’

‘The Mechanicum bargain of fealty. Weapons, technology, materiel, knowledge and aid,’ he said. ‘That I know well.’

Esha nodded. ‘Procon’s Knights were old. Its lords had lost most of the secrets needed to keep their mounts running. Steam took the place of plasma. Explosive lances and steel swords were wielded instead of energy weapons. From what I know, I don’t think the Knight suits would have survived longer than a few more generations had the priests not come.’

‘Poor incentive for the priests.’

She smiled. ‘Ah, there were other devices on Procon that the Mechanicum coveted.’

‘Aren’t there always? The priests are rapacious.’ Harrtek moved to Esha’s side. She matched her footsteps to his, but they immediately began to drift out of time again. ‘I’ll bet they paraded the finest examples of Knightly tech they could and asked for only a few, small favours in return.’

‘Naturally,’ she said. ‘In fact, I think they brought a lance of House Taranis with

them for that very purpose. The Knights of Procon must have looked like beggars in their battered engines. They probably meant to look proud, but felt like fools.'

Harrtek grunted a laugh. 'So what did these foolish beggars sell for their shining new guns and warsuits?'

'Well, therein lies the tale,' said Esha. Harrtek was very close. He was a large man, physically imposing, and he loomed over her. They stopped and turned to face each other. She flashed a smile and laid a hand on his chest, not to push away, but to invite him in. 'There was a contest,' she said. 'To snatch a favour of the machine and take it to the representatives of Mars visiting the planet. The Knights were supposed to fight for it, but the Great Mother took it instead. House Vi cheated, they say. The women of that world were not permitted to ride within the Knights as they are elsewhere. Procon is a stratified place.'

'Is that so?' said Harrtek. 'Then how did she come to take it?'

'There is a goddess they used to follow on Procon, Pahkmetris of the hunt. Popular with women. The Great Mother was a devotee. She rode a horse through a melee of Knights and stole the prize.'

'A horse?' he said. He moved closer.

'You know. An equid. An ancient beast of Terra. They're common on some worlds. I saw one once. They are quite beautiful. The point is, her mount was flesh and blood – she could have died. She broke the rules of the contest but the Mechanicum exploited the situation and said her house had won. Her father – who was the king, by the way – Rahajanan, thought he could exploit them in return. Part of the exchange was to be a tithe of young nobles to go to Tigris. Rahajanan saw the opportunity to save his warriors, and so offered the daughters of his house instead. He thought he was being clever. His daughter was troublesome. His Knights were valuable. But,' she whispered. They were close enough to one another that they shared breath. 'Rahajanan was deceived. He could think only as a beggar king. He did not know what the Mechanicum required his warriors for. He thought he had tricked the red priests and saved his best warriors for himself, selling off his house's daughters in their stead to who knew what fate. He did not care. He kept his Knights. They gained the technologies of the outland men. What did it matter to him if it cost him a few women?'

'Sounds like a good deal to me,' said Harrtek.

Esha shook her head. 'Like most lords of the Knightly houses, Rahajanan's view was fatally constrained. He had no conception of the power of Terra or

Mars. He could not guess at the might wielded by the Mechanicum. He did not know that, only weeks' travel away, war engines far mightier than those he had bartered his children for stood sentinel over a new world of industry, the forge world Tigris. He did not know of the *Titans*. So, our Great Mother was sent away from the plains and forests, away from her brothers, away from her beloved mount. Her, and one hundred and fifty other bartered daughters of House Vi.' The smile she gave him now was less mocking, more of pleasure. 'It did not matter to the Mechanicum of Tigris whether the Knightly houses provided males or females. They required good gene stock with proven compatibility with mind impulse units from a politically neutral source, that is all, and so the Great Mother's bitterness at her exile turned to a grim delight as she and her sisters were trained as the mistresses of a new Legio of god-machines.

'When she returned to Procon several years later, her father had to kneel before her. I imagine she laughed to see that. His vaunted warsuit was a child before the machine she ruled. He had played the cunning king, and unwittingly elevated his daughter to godhood.'

'A foolish king,' Harrtek agreed. 'But why do you remain only women? This was years ago, surely. What about loss replacement, new recruits?'

'How do you recruit?'

'Stringent testing of all children of our Legio for the desired attributes. Courage, ferocity and intelligence.'

'The rest?'

He smiled humourlessly. 'You know what happens to the rest. We are well provided with servitors. Every child of our Legio knows the price if they are found wanting. It encourages the ruthlessness we require.'

'Well, we are different.' She laid her other hand on his chest.

Harrtek shrugged. 'Every Legio has its ways. Some are better than others.'

'Yours are the best?'

He grinned savagely. 'Your own ways are always the best.'

'The exiled daughters made a pact within their new Legio, that no man would ever command them, that they would take their own counsel, and that although they were forbidden from worshipping her, they would honour the principles of the sacred huntress alongside the Machine-God. Since the day of our founding, every single one of our Legio Titan crew has been female.'

'What do you do with the males?'

'You know what happens to the rest,' she said, echoing his words.

'Really? Servitors?'

She laughed. ‘No! Most of us are vat born, selected to be female at conception. The few natural males we give birth to are given to the priesthood. Many end up serving the Legio as tech-priests.’

‘But some are servitors?’

‘Yes, some are,’ she admitted.

He moved in closer to her. Their cheeks brushed.

‘For someone who was ashamed of his desires, you seem very practised.’

‘I said I was imperfect – I never said I did not indulge myself,’ he said. ‘Tell me, where do these male children come from?’ he breathed into her ear. ‘You allow no pair bonding, and you are all female anyway. Do the tech-priests open up their gene vaults for you to choose?’

‘Oh no,’ Esha whispered back. ‘We don’t make them *all* like that.’

Harrtek kissed her with a ferocity she welcomed.

The god-machines stared across the aisle at one another, unconcerned by the doings of the mortals at their feet.

And that was how Terent Harrtek met Esha Ani Mohana.

ELEVEN

Sleepless

Inactivity was the worst of all situations for a Titan princeps. They longed for battle, and their desire was not solely the product of bloodthirstiness. Many warriors sought glory in war, and that included many princeps, but for the Titan lords their desire for the field was of a deeper sort. Once a princeps had bonded with their Titan a score or more times, then glory, duty, victory, all the finer qualities of war became secondary to a deep, physical need. A princeps wished for battle because they sought escape from their frail bodies. No man or woman could become a god for a while and not yearn for the sensation when it was done. A princeps in peace was an angel cast out of heaven, and like those mythical beings, they suffered when they walked the impure lands of mortals. Symptoms included chills, aching in the bones like ice wrapped in fire, nausea, ennui and crippling migraines. Esha mentally ticked off the list of agonies that, long ago, the instructors of the Legio scholastica had told her to expect when away from her machine.

As a list, they were an abstract. Experienced, they were beyond description.

She often thought of that list as she tried to sleep and failed while a thousand discomforts played havoc with her nerves, an occurrence that happened more often than not now. She and Second Maniple had seen no action for six weeks. The Legio held the Iridium yards and the moon. Mohana Mankata Vi showed no desire to expand their holdings. They were too strong to challenge in their stronghold, and so an uneasy truce fell between the Legios Fureans, Vulpa and

Solaria. But at least the other maniples were sent out on patrol. Hers was not. She wondered if she had offended the Great Mother in some way, or if, conversely, she was being protected. She was the last daughter of Mohana Mankata Vi. Maybe there was something symbolic in her person the Great Mother dared not risk. Maybe it was sentimentality.

The *Tantamon* was moored with the rest of the fleet in the lee of the moon. Sporadic firing flashed around Theta-Garmon V's high orbital sphere, but the exchange of gunfire was unenthusiastic, predictable and ineffective. *Tantamon*'s defence weaponry rattled away ceaselessly, however. When it was not knocking torpedoes out of the void, it was vaporising the larger, more dangerous chunks of orbitals destroyed earlier in the war. Huge amounts of metal circled the gas giant. A fleck of paint would hole an unshielded vessel when travelling at forty thousand kilometres an hour. A piece a few metres across would bring down the void shields of a capital ship.

The increased power draw of the guns changed the song of the ship's systems to an irritating, insectile whine, and the metal vibrated to an inconstant pattern. By each trembling beat she recognised the various batteries firing. At times like that, she resented her empathy for machines.

She really had spent too much time in that room.

Her bed was a partly enclosed cot set into the wall that seemed designed for maximum claustrophobic effect, an accusation that could equally be levelled at the whole room. Her quarters were tiny. A little desk took up a third of the space. There was a small sink with a single tube tap in the wall opposite the bed, and a wardrobe opposite the desk near the foot of the bed. Between engagements, the room was her corner of the universe. It stank of her own stale odour layered over that of princeps of earlier days still clinging on. The void ship was old, and dirty. Standards had been allowed to slip as the civil war dragged on, and in any case too many agonised, wide-eyed nights had been endured in those quarters for any amount of cleaning to expunge the smell of desperation.

The *Tantamon* maintained a steady temperature in its inhabited decks that was just the wrong side of comfortably warm. The cot's single sheet was soaked with sweat and tangled in her bare legs. She knew already she wouldn't sleep, but she was dogged, and chased after rest like a good huntress. She supposed she should close her eyes again, but that only made the throbbing around her MIU ports worse. She had the feeling they were being rejected by her flesh, pushed out of her body by her rebellious bones. After months of suffering, she'd finally gone to the magos medicae biologis. He had assured her such a thing was impossible.

She wasn't completely convinced. Beside the pains inflicted by her body, there were the tricks played by her mind. Recently, she had begun to feel small, as if the world of mortals her flesh body navigated was a ludicrous miniature, and she had been shrunk down from her rightful height to dwell there as a punishment.

'Get it together, Esha,' she whispered. Her lips were cracked and her breath was stale. 'Much more of this and they'll tank you.'

She stared at the cot's low ceiling. A previous occupant had scratched a representation of Pahkmetris into the metal. The felid-headed goddess was a tiny expression of individuality, but a dangerous one. The depiction of deities was against the Imperial Truth and the Cult Mechanicus, and would lead to demotion were it spotted. The image must have remained secret or it would have been repaired. By not reporting it herself, Esha joined her own minor defiance to that of whoever had carved the image and those others who had likewise not reported it. They were probably like her, thankful of something to look at while they lay in that cot in the depths of the night wrestling with withdrawal from their god-engine. Besides, the picture's existence didn't matter any more. The Imperial Truth was a shaky creed. All the old certainties were gone. The truth was out; there were other gods besides the holy trinity of knowledge, and none of them were kind.

Her legs jiggled endlessly. She felt like they were swarming with small insects. Keeping them still was agony. She groaned and ran her hands over her face. It was slick. Her hair was greasy.

'Restless legs were not on the list,' she muttered to herself. She groaned again. 'You're not going to sleep, Esha. This is a waste of time.'

She half expected a reply, as she sometimes received from the machines in the Titan. Nothing spoke. It was terribly lonely, she thought, out of the manifold. No touch of minds upon her own. That was the worst of all.

Sweaty feet thudded onto the floor. She got up carefully to avoid catching her interfaces on the cot's rim. The tap of the sink dispensed only lukewarm water that tasted of oil. She rinsed her mouth out with it and splashed some on her face. It made her feel marginally better.

The chair scraped on the floor as she pulled it out, but the cabin walls were thick and there was no danger she would disturb anyone. She wasn't the only princeps who slept badly.

Infrasound throbbed through the deck below the level of human hearing. She would be able to hear that properly, if she were joined to *Domine Ex Venari*, and learn what the ship was saying.

Stop it, she thought.

Devices made small noises in the spaces of the walls. She stopped herself before mentally attempting to bring up status information for them, another thing she could not do in this body of flesh. She was blind, powerless, weak.

'Stop it!' she said louder than she intended, slapping her hand hard on the desktop. Her vehemence surprised her.

There was a single data-slate on the desk, next to her only personal possession: a framed pict of her first maniple. They'd convinced a remembrancer to take the shot on his picter and give them copies. A small indulgence from long ago. The chemicals in the pict were degrading, the image washed out, but the faces of her comrades were sharp enough to spark memories. Her younger self looked back at her shyly, but the belief in what she was doing was strong in her eyes, like she would stare the galaxy down. They were all like that, back then.

'Before the war,' she said.

Three of the five women in the picture were dead. Only she and Durana remained from that group.

She turned the pict face down, and activated the data-slate.

'Access Legio war records.'

<State specific Legio record required.>

'Pacification and compliance of Dendritica, 987M30.'

<Clearance required,> the data-slate said. It had a pompous little voice.

Esha snorted. 'Really? Come on.'

<Clearance required.>

'Cog and skull,' she muttered. 'Mohana, Esha Ani, princeps majoris, Legio Solaria, Second Maniple, line of Mohana Mankata Vi, first generation. Ident code delta four-three-three-two. Now let me in – I'm the daughter of the Great Mother, recognise my pedigree or I'll smash your screen in, you jumped-up data shunt.'

<Clearance granted,> said the machine.

Stacked icons filled the screen. Everything about the campaign was there, from requisition orders to vid feed from guided missiles. She found what she wanted quickly enough.

'Play back vid picter capture, *Bestia Est*, date 002987M30.'

<Compliance,> said the machine, in the same fussy tones.

The vid played, and Esha remembered.

Bestia Est was a Warhound Titan of Fifteenth Maniple and her first command.

As a grandis scale class machine it was small at seventeen metres, a height not much greater than that of the larger Knight warsuits, but it was still a god-machine, and she was proud of it and her small crew. She experienced none of those positive feelings the day Legio Vulpa marched on Biphex.

'Legio Vulpa are still not responding to our calls,' Esha said. 'They are still proceeding.'

White spires and towers of glass gleamed in the sun. Legio Vulpa's machines crept towards Biphex like murderers. She thought of the women in the city, the mothers in particular. What Vulpa intended was an outrage against humanity.

Esha's changing body shape made her uncomfortable. The straps had to be adapted to fit around her swelling belly. The worst of it was the pressure around her lower abdomen, most of which seemed to press into her bladder. Esha had never used the ablution pads built into her combat suit. She preferred to wait rather than soak herself in her own piss, but if this kept up she was going to have to use it. Almost as bad as the need to pee was the dull ache around her coccyx. No matter how she sat, it twinged. No position was comfortable for longer than ten minutes.

Only another twelve weeks, she thought. Then it'll be done.

Leaning forwards in her command harness took some of the pressure off her back, but it put her at a strange angle that would have her legs cramping soon, and the restraint straps cut into her shoulders. She ignored it, trying to achieve a deeper bond with her Titan so she could block out the discomfort completely.

Bestia Est responded to her agitation and picked up speed. This was not the best time for conflict to arise with their allies. The Titan was affected by Esha's changing mental state, and the systems had become truculent. *Bestia Est* acted cautiously where ordinarily it was first into the fray. The manifold link was strained. Esha was too aware of her pregnant body, and when *Bestia Est*'s wild soul called for her guidance, her thoughts were on the city ahead.

Most Legios used their Warhounds as scouts, for they were swift, while their lower profiles and modest power output meant they were surprisingly easy to miss in the maelstrom of war. Legio Solaria used them for another purpose: as hunting dogs. Esha's pack was four strong, as Legio doctrine demanded. Three other Warhounds loped in a widely spaced line alongside *Bestia Est*, the combined thunder of their feet kicking up a towering column of dust into the still summer air.

The maniple's command Reaver ran behind them, already outpaced. The princeps pushed their Warhounds hard. Legio Vulpa had a head start on them,

and they were closing on their target.

'Legio Vulpa respond,' Esha said, fighting to keep the strain from her voice. 'Please cease your march and engage communications via vox or by infospheric datalink. The course of action you are pursuing is illegal. Stand down, power down your weapons.'

Legio Vulpa's machines continued their steady pace.

'They haven't powered their weapons up, not yet,' said Jehani Jehan, who was, in those distant days, Esha's steerswoman aboard *Bestia Est*.

'That means nothing. By Terra, I think they're going to do it. They're actually going to do it.'

Orders pinged into the machine's manifold.

'About time,' Esha said, absorbing them. 'Full speed. Bring weapons online.'

'We're going to fire on them?' her left weapons moderati said incredulously.

'We're going to threaten them,' said Esha. She did not say that she would fire on the other Legio if commanded. The mind blend between the crew was already fragile; this information threatened to break it. She forgave them. Nothing like this had happened since the Crimson Accords and the Treaty of Mons Olympus had ended rivalry between the forges of Mars. No Legio had fired on another in two hundred years.

The Warhound's motors whined. The reactor thrummed through the Titan's skeleton with building power. Machines all around Esha gave audible cues signifying readiness. Indicator lights switched from amber to green. *Bestia Est* and the rest were running flat out now, far ahead of the maniple Reaver.

'Plasma blastgun online and ready,' her left weapons moderati said.

'Mega bolter ready,' said the right.

'Spool up power to the Vulcan. Begin rotation in preparation for firing,' she ordered. Visual input from the Titan's sensorium meshed queasily with her own sight and hearing. Anxiety ate into her concentration. She needed to remain dispassionate, but she could not in the face of Legio Vulpa's determination to raze Biphex.

There are fifty thousand people in that city, she thought. Fifty thousand innocents.

As it ran faster, *Bestia Est* began to sway. Its splay-toed feet gouged deep prints into farmland despite the sun-baked hardness of the soil. Nearer Biphex were greener areas, orchards of fruit trees, flimsy plastek growing huts on stilts and ranks of vines lined up neatly. *Bestia Est* and her sisters kicked it all to ruin. The machine ran on, faster and faster, trailing irrigation drip pipes and fixing wires

from its feet.

‘Harrtek, answer me!’ she said.

Still no reply.

‘Harrtek!’

Unprompted, *Bestia Est* let out a howl from its war-horns. Her sisters joined in. Polyphonic arrays gave each Titan a different voice. Together they made a mournful, desperate music.

‘They’re still not responding,’ said Jehani Jehan. ‘Emperor, how are we going to stop them? What do we do?’ She turned around in her seat. Through the glass of the faceplate she stared out wide-eyed. Rivulets of sweat coursed down her forehead.

The desperation of Jehani’s words struck Esha. Emotion knifed her through the manifold. Jehani’s sense of complete powerlessness was a feeling that would stay with Esha forever.

‘Bring me around in front of them,’ said Esha. ‘Now!’

Esha cut dead a query from the princeps majoris as *Bestia Est* swayed right, forcing its pack mate *Gonfalon* out of the way.

‘Faster!’ Esha said. The Legio Vulpa were approaching the city limits. The farmland stopped abruptly at a small, rockcrete boundary wall that curved back on itself in a graceful wave. It protected the streets against seasonal flooding that turned the farmland into a lake and Biphex into an island. In picts it looked beautiful. The Death Stalkers could ruin that in minutes.

Bestia Est ran around in front of a Legio Vulpa Reaver, causing it to stop gracelessly and blare out an angry warning.

‘They are locking their guns on us,’ said Esha’s moderati oratorius.

‘I am aware of that fact,’ she said. She tried not to see the vast god-weapons tracking her engine, but the Warhound’s oculus was large, and its machine senses too sharp to ignore.

Legio Vulpa’s Maniple Seven came to a halt in a staggered line two hundred metres from the city. *Bestia Est* stopped on the scrubby ground between farm and flood wall. Three Warlords and two Reavers glared at her with unblinking machine eyes, their guns locked on to the head of the Titan. They could annihilate the Warhound in an instant.

‘Do we raise shields?’ asked Jehani.

‘No,’ said Esha.

‘Esha!’

‘Leave them down. Don’t provoke them.’

She imagined what was happening in Biphex. The people in the windows stopping to stare and point. The questions: what are they doing? Why are they here? The growing panic.

A chime in her ear announced inter-Legio vox communication.

'I'll say this once, Esha,' said Terent Harrtek. *'Get out of my way.'*

'I will not,' she said. 'This world is hours from compliance. Negotiations are nearly concluded. Biphex does not need to be destroyed. The people within are innocent.'

'They are not innocent,' said Harrtek. '*The leaders of this city refused compliance. The population served as soldiers. They have denied the Emperor. They do not deserve to live.'*

'Their leaders are at the negotiating table.'

'The negotiations have taken too long already. It is a ruse. The enemy are preparing for long-term guerrilla war.'

'They are not our enemies,' said Esha.

'In razing this place to the ground,' continued Harrtek, *'we shall ensure true compliance, today. Once they have witnessed the power of our god-engines, they will not dare to raise their arms against the Imperium.'*

'I will not allow you to murder fifty thousand people!' Esha said.

'This is not murder. It is war. Stand aside. Or do you wish to be remembered as the woman who provoked the first inter-collegium conflict since the Age of Strife?'

'Now they're powering their weapons,' said Jehani Jehan.

'Stand aside,' repeated Harrtek. The volcano cannon on *Nuntio Dolores*' left arm mount dropped down until the barrel was pointing directly at *Bestia Est*'s face.

A tense half minute passed by. It was the longest of her life.

The voice of her princeps majoris came to her over the vox. *'Stand down.'*

'What?' Esha responded.

'Stand down, princeps. The Legio Vulpa are operating according to the terms of our alliance, and within the precepts of crusade. If we stop them, we risk internal war.'

'Is this your command, my princeps?' she thought back. 'You wished to stop them as much as I.'

'I still do. This tears my heart. The Great Mother commands it.'

'Mother,' whispered Esha.

'Politics,' said the princeps majoris. *'Stand aside, for the good of our Legio and*

the Imperium.'

Esha shut her eyes. She imagined the people of the city more clearly. She imagined their fear.

'Esha, withdraw!' commanded the princeps majoris.

She stared up into the volcano cannon barrel.

'Power down all weapons,' she said quietly. 'Retreat. Rejoin the pack.'

Bestia Est skulked off like a whipped dog to rejoin its sisters. Harrtek chuckled drily.

'Good girl,' he said. *'You are welcome to help us, if you wish.'*

'I will have no part of this,' she replied.

'You have already played your part, Esha,' said Harrtek. *'You are deluded if you think the unification of mankind can be accomplished bloodlessly. I would say this gives me no pleasure, but that would be a lie. So must die all the enemies of Unity!'*

The link cut. The three Warlords of Legio Vulpa Maniple Seven began to walk again. The two Reavers paced after them slowly, waists rotating to keep the pack of Warhounds covered.

Nuntio Dolores' foot crushed the flood wall into powder as it strode directly into a tower. A bright line shone off the glass where the void shields touched it. The next stride sent *Nuntio Dolores*' left shoulder right through the building. The building's face deformed; glass burst into uncountable shards that bounced in shining rain from the Titan's armour. Its volcano cannon punched through the building to the other side, dragging out supports as the Titan waded into the city. As the Titan pulled free, the building's top slumped into itself. Floors slid down and scattered into the streets like skidding cards from a dropped deck. The weight broke the tower, and the whole edifice collapsed.

Nuntio Dolores' power claw swung into another tower block, taking out the mid-section in a cloud of dust that danced with disruption lightning. Its maniple brothers followed. Together, they carved an avenue of destruction through the towers of glass.

They had not even fired their weapons yet.

For five minutes, they continued their slow, methodical path of destruction. A collective scream rose from Biphex, loud enough for Esha to hear through the Warhound's hull.

Shortly after that, Legio Vulpa began to shoot.

Esha rested her hand protectively on her belly. The child within turned over, pushing against her palm.

‘Stop replay,’ she said.

Nuntio Dolores’ back was trapped in a slice of time within the data-slate. It jumped slightly in the feed, its carapace shrouded in dust. Esha fancied she could still hear the screams issuing from the flickering image.

‘Deactivate,’ she said. The image collapsed into a single point of light.

She stared at the blank glass display for a long time. Everything had changed after that. Relations deteriorated with Legio Vulpa to the extent that the Legio were separated and assigned to different expeditionary fleets. She had seen Terent Harrtek one final time before they parted, and not since until she faced his Warlord upon Iridium’s docklands.

She had known he was capable of that kind of atrocity the day they met. What could she say? The women of the Legio were free to find their own bonds, if they wished. Harrtek’s arrogance had attracted her. The first time she saw him, she wanted to get close to him, to antagonise him, to make him snap. She wished to humble him. A sad smile curved her mouth. A princeps was prideful on and off the field. The desire to prove their Legio best infiltrated everything. She really wasn’t that much different to him. They lost so much, joining with the machines. Sometimes she felt like she was but an extension of *Domine Ex Venari*, her needs and moods too closely aligned with that of the machine to call herself truly human.

The last casualty of that miserable day was her friendship with Jehani Jehan. They continued to fight well together, but the closeness they had once shared was weakened, and finally broken with Abhani Lus’ birth. No matter how many moderati of the Jehan bloodline Esha surrounded herself with, she could not recapture their lost friendship. Something else to hate Harrtek for.

Durana Fahl had been there at Biphex too, as princeps on *Red Claw*. The effect on their relationship was the opposite, the shameful memory binding them together. The rest of her sisters from that time were dead or on the other side of the galaxy. Two and a half decades had gone by. She could scarcely believe it.

Esha rested her chin in one hand and tapped her nails on the table. They were short, lined with oil, not particularly feminine by the standards of many worlds. She wondered what kind of woman she would have been if she had been born elsewhere, on Procon for example, living out her life in the gilded cage of a noblewoman.

Biphex was when everything had changed. It was the time the dream of the Great Crusade had died for her. If she could trace her path into this violence that ripped apart the Imperium to a moment, it was when Harrtek stepped through the

wall. The fault for the war against the Emperor rested with his demigod sons and their wounded egos, but they were not solely responsible.

The war had so many beginnings. Its roots lay in every bitter thought about an ally, every gun raised in anger on a friend, every imagined knife plunged into a brother's back. Each man and woman engaged in the war had a moment like Biphex.

If only it had not been so.

She sighed and kicked back in the chair. No use dealing in what-ifs or whys. No alternative path that she could dream up or hopeless wish would stop the fighting.

'I'll try to sleep,' she promised herself. She leaned forwards to get up, believing that perhaps she could rest.

She was denied the chance to find out.

The grating buzz of the hardline vox set into the wall kept her from bed. She got up, picked up the handset with one hand, and silenced the alarm and its accompanying red light with the other.

'Esha Ani Mohana,' said the Vox Omni Machina. *'The Great Mother wishes to see you.'*

TWELVE

The Great Mother

Esha was joined by Abhani as she walked the long port-side corridor of the mass conveyor. She was surprised to see her daughter, but did not show it, maintaining instead her superior officer's aloofness. Legio first, their motto ran. Esha was Abhani's commander before she was her mother.

'Why does she want to see us?' asked Abhani. She was still young and possessed of youth's talkativeness. She reminded Esha of herself that age. 'Just you and I? That's unusual. Has something similar happened to you before?'

'It has,' said Esha. 'But it is unusual,' she added after a moment.

'What do you think she wants?' Abhani asked. She frowned. 'Have we erred?'

'Do not attempt to guess, my daughter. The Great Mother does as the Great Mother will. You should learn restraint. Speculation leads to restlessness. A good huntress must take the situation she finds and exploit it to her best advantage, not waste her time wishing for it to be otherwise.'

Abhani was chastened. Esha felt a pang of guilt. Had she not been speculating herself only half an hour before? The early days with Abhani had been wonderful, but they were long gone. The age gap between them was much smaller than between the vat sisters and daughters of the Legio. Esha was a hundred years younger than her own mother. The naturalness of Abhani's birth made the situation harder rather than easier. It baffled her that humans had reproduced in this way for so long; many still did. The biology made a kind of sense, but the relationships were awkward.

They fell into an uneasy silence. It took fifteen minutes of walking through long corridors and a ride in a low pressure express tube before they reached the other end of the *Tantamon,* and the way into First Maniple's drop-ship.

What they found there concerned Esha greatly. The sally tunnel through the great war gates had been filled with votive images and incense sticks. The walls were covered over with neatly printed repeating mathematical formulae. The calculations were incomplete, of the most sacred kind. She recognised them though she was not indoctrinated into the higher mysteries, for they were a central part of the cult, the closest any tech-priest of any forge world had come to rendering the Prime Equation, the incantation by which the Machine-God had called his Machina Cosma into being.

A reverent hush filled the hangar. The Great Mother's Warlord *Luxor Invictoria* stood in gleaming majesty at the far end of the drop-ship. There were identical sets of gates at prow and stern of the craft to allow rapid deployment into battle, but those the Great Mother stood against were hidden by a banner made from a single piece of cloth fifty metres high. Around *Luxor Invictoria*'s broad, beweaponed shoulders the edges of the emblem of the *hegemaarkhus* were visible: Tigris' badge, a towering, pyramidal forge complex framing the sacred flame of knowledge, superimposed over a cog.

A million candles moulded from used oils turned the central access road running down the centre of the ship into a river of light. The myrmidons of First Maniple, all Warlords, faced the door Esha and Abhani entered by, standing guard over their order's leader. They were active, and their anti-personnel weaponry tracked the women as they walked into the ship.

The drop-ship had been turned into a shrine. This was not normal, even for the Great Mother. Ordinarily the tech-priests showed their respect in the naoz. The drop-ships were kept clear of clutter. Worse still was the silence. No tech-priests or servitors were working. No hymns or sacred equations were being sung.

Abhani came to a halt, open-mouthed. 'What's going on?' she said.

'Nothing that need concern us.' But Esha was just as discomfited by the solemn signs of piety on display.

A premidius, a senior tech-priest deimechanic, came to them and wordlessly beckoned them to follow him to the foot of a curling spiral stair of brass and onyx that had been built around *Luxor Invictoria*'s left leg. He pointed upwards, bowed and withdrew.

'Come with me, daughter,' said Esha.

The stairs wound round and round the leg, allowing them to come close to the holy mechanisms of motion. Esha suspected the steps were intended to induce a feeling of humility, and they certainly worked in that regard. She felt insignificant beside the monstrous pistons at the back of the Titan's knee. When they came around again to the front, the Titan's head jutted over them, immense as a cliff, engulfing them in its shadow.

The steps leaned out on extravagantly arched cantilevers, allowing them to pass over the Titan's hips and the giant gyroscope housings. From there the steps headed up and further out to connect with the balcony at the rear of the machine. Access to a Warlord was above the waist, anatomically lower than a Reaver's boarding portal, which was set between the shoulders. On the balcony they were level with the rear portions of the god-machine's immense weapons. The Great Mother was a firm believer in pinpoint kill shots at range, and *Luxor Invictoria* was equipped with twinned volcano cannons.

The door did not open. The opus machina on the door, resplendent in lacquered black and white, stared at them judgementally. They took their places before it.

'What now, mother?' said Abhani.

'We wait on the Great Mother's pleasure, my daughter.'

Abhani sighed and turned away to lean on the balcony rail, where she stared at the emblem of their forge world on the flag. The Titan's defensive weapons were alert and tracked her movements. The whining servos of the ball mounts cut through the silence.

Esha remained facing the symbol moulded into the doorway. Steady heat radiated from the Titan's reactor within.

The rattle of heavy bolts retracting in sequence had Abhani returning to her mother's side and Esha standing straighter to attention. The doors split apart, dividing the holy skull and cog in two.

The green glass eyes of the Vox Omni Machina glowed in the dark entrance.

'Greetings, Princeps Majoris Esha Ani Mohana, Princeps Abhani Lus Mohana, the Great Mother is expecting you.'

He stood aside.

Abhani moved. Esha stopped her with a hand.

'What is the meaning of all this, holy father of machines?' Esha asked. 'Why is the drop-ship dressed as a temple?'

'This is a solemn time, daughter of war,' said the Vox Omni Machina.

'What do you mean by that?' she said.

'I know you well, princeps majoris. You possess the necessary mental acuity to

deduce the current situation from the visual implications before you. It is not my place to say. The Great Mother will discuss it with you, if that is her will.'

Esha sighed in dissatisfaction, and entered *Luxor Invictoria.* The door was large enough to pass through without stooping.

A spiral stair went up at the right-hand side of the deck, taking them past cramped, open subdecks crammed with servitor alcoves and stations for the tech clade who maintained the Titan. The reactor occupied a sealed, central cylinder that ran the whole way through the Titan's torso. Its power output was much larger than the one on *Domine Ex Venari*, and its working even while idle electrified the air and made the metal shake.

In the atrium at the top of the torso, behind the head, two neokora worked under the supervision of a premidius. They attended to their tasks in respectful silence. A shrine occupied the rear wall, thick with papers bearing equations, the wax from old candles and offerings of minor components and sacred trinkets. The tech-priests ignored them, but turned respectfully away as the door to the head opened so they would not profane the Great Mother with the touch of their eyes.

The Great Mother's tank was immediately visible, for it took up most of the czella, the place of command. The higher the Titan class, the holier the czella, and *Luxor Invictoria*'s was holy indeed. Abhani gave a little gasp. Both of them felt the warning prickle of hairs rising as they trespassed on sacred ground.

The czella was dark. The status lights of dormant machines glinted on the tank's armourglass in smeared patterns of red, amber, blue and green. Amnion filled the tank with blue shadow. Darker lines could have been feed lines or neural connectors or perhaps the limbs of the Great Mother herself.

Within that prison of armourglass and sustaining fluid was Esha's mother.

One of the neokora in the atrium depressed a button. A mechanism filled with the motive force and engaged loudly. Lumens blinked on in the czella and around the base of the tank. Blue shadow became blank white. A human shape moved with liquid slowness inside.

Vox emitters crackled on.

'Esha Ani. Abhani Lus,' said the Great Mother, her voice filling the czella. 'Welcome, my daughter and my granddaughter. Come within the holy place of command.'

The two princeps entered the head of *Luxor Invictoria.* The door slid shut behind them. There was hardly any room with the tank in there, and they were forced to stand with their backs to the door and their faces close to the glass.

'It has been too long, daughter,' said Mohana Mankata Vi.

‘It has,’ said Esha.

‘And you, my granddaughter.’

‘Thank you, Great Mother, I… I… this is such an honour,’ stammered Abhani.

‘You have been to this place once before.’ The words were addressed to Abhani, but the omnidirectional nature of the vox emitters made them seem impersonal.

‘I don’t remember,’ said Abhani.

‘You were a babe in arms,’ said the Great Mother.

‘You brought me here?’ Abhani asked Esha.

‘I desired to see you myself,’ said the Great Mother.

‘I am sorry to have forgotten the honour, forgive me,’ said Abhani. She bowed her head.

‘Not everything in life is a matter of honour,’ said the Great Mother. ‘The first time was the privilege of family, and my pleasure. Though this time, now you are a woman and a princeps, you may account it an honour, and I am sure you shall remember it.’ Despite the strange electronic modulation, Mohana Mankata Vi’s voice was full of humour.

‘What might I do for you, Great Mother?’ said Esha. The head of the Warlord was as cramped as that of her Reaver. A narrow gap had been left for Mohana Mankata Vi’s moderati to squeeze past the tank to their stations. Otherwise the front of the czella was completely obscured by the Great Mother’s life support systems.

‘So quickly to the point, my daughter. Very well. We are to be relieved by the Legio Atarus and redeployed to the core system.’

‘But, but, this is our fight,’ said Abhani in consternation. ‘We have held this place for weeks. We should have the honour of retaking Theta-Garmon.’

Abhani’s attitude flipped from meek to outraged in a moment. This was why their relationship was difficult. She had too much of her father’s aggression. Esha gritted her teeth.

‘Silence,’ said Esha. ‘Do not question the Great Mother’s will.’

‘The decision has been taken,’ said the Great Mother. ‘Beta-Garmon screams for help. The capital world has fallen to the Warmaster. Nyrcon City is once again in his hands. The subsidiary planets of Beta-Garmon are in deadly peril. We shall acquiesce to the requests of Lord General Bollivar of Fasadia, and bring our engines to Beta-Garmon III.’

‘What about all we’ve done? What about the fight here?’ said Abhani. ‘Loyalist forces reach critical mass. The offensive will begin soon! We cannot abandon

this glory. We have rightly won our place here.'

'Remember who you address!' hissed Esha.

'A princeps should speak her mind,' said Mohana Mankata Vi to her daughter, 'though never so insubordinately,' she said to her granddaughter. 'It is my decision. We are to be replaced by the Legio Atarus. We do not possess enough heavy maniples to contest this warzone. The Firebrands have more engines, and a greater proportion of battle-line units. Wars are won by the application of appropriate levels of force. This is not a fight that is favourable to our order. Our talents are required elsewhere.'

Esha placed a hand on Abhani's arm. Abhani tried to tug away, but Esha's grip was firm.

'So that's it? We're running to heel like hunting dogs?' said Abhani. 'Who is this man to command us to obey? Great Mother, please. We should remain to see our task here completed. Don't listen to them!'

Mohana Mankata Vi's voice sounded loudly. 'Obey? A Legio of the Collegia Titanica does not have to *obey* anyone, Abhani Lus. We are the wardens of the god-machines. We are the iron fist of the Machine-God. We are above all. Above the orders of Terra, and of Mars. We are beyond the command of our forge worlds. By ancient design, we are independent, to avoid ensnarement in the politics of men. We safeguard the domains of the Cult Mechanicus as we see fit. We agree audience for petitions for aid, and grant our might according to our own will upon the petitioners' merits. We are not *told*. The Titans of the Imperial Hunters walk at my decree, no one else's. If we go to Beta-Garmon, then it is because I command it to be so. A month of negotiation is behind this decision. I do not act on impulse. Ever.'

Abhani let out an angry noise and shook off her mother's hand.

'Be at peace, granddaughter. We are understrength. We are hunter killers. The battle to retake Theta-Garmon V will be a head-on clash between scores of heavy maniples. If we face the Tiger Eyes and Legio Vulpa in open combat, they will be victorious. Let the Firebrands earn their glory here. This is their kind of war. We will be more useful elsewhere.'

'I won't have it. Those dogs of the Legio Vulpa are still here! We can kill them, take them down. It's our right! Why can't we stay and aid the Firebrands?'

Mohana Mankata Vi's outline moved in the amnion.

'Ah, Abhani Lus, I see where your demands stem from. Your hatred of our old rivals is commendable, but your modus is unbecoming for a princeps. You will remember your place, and calm yourself, or your position as commander of the

Os Rubrum shall be granted to another. Perhaps a spell as a steersman will cool your temper, and allow you time to think properly on the strategic exigencies of engine war.'

Abhani's face went white. 'I…'

'Kneel, Abhani Lus.'

Abhani dropped to her knees. Her reddish hair flopped over her face, hiding her shame.

'I do not judge you harshly, granddaughter, for I too suffer the burden of human emotion. Do you think I called you here to relay this piece of information, when you could receive it with the rest of the order? Why do you think a mere Warhound princeps should be brought into my presence? I assure you it is not because I seek your counsel. I do you honour by speaking with you of such matters, and you show your respect by questioning my judgement?'

'I am sorry, forgive me. Do not take *Os Rubrum* from me. I will show my worth, I swear!' Abhani said.

Mohana Mankata Vi's tone softened. 'I wished to see you both because the Legio will most likely be split. Perhaps not immediately, but it will have to be so. Esha is the last of my natural daughters, you are my last true granddaughter. The pair of you are part of me, not creatures spun of artificial genes whose code was stolen from my own, or clones born from copies of copies. You are my children. We are family.' Her voice quietened further. 'That once meant something to humanity, before this madness we experience replaced the brief hope of Imperium. Stand, granddaughter. Come close to my tank. Forget your anger, remember our bond.'

Abhani moved to the glass. Something came forward. Esha saw her mother's silhouette more clearly than she had for a dozen years. Despite the lines snaking back through the liquid and all the accoutrements of technology sustaining her life far beyond its natural span, she was still human. A shadowed head moved closer, then a hand thumped against the glass. It was white, pallid, swollen with fluid absorbed from the amnion, but it was a hand of flesh and blood. A living hand. Abhani flinched.

'Yes, yes,' Mohana Mankata Vi said, as if seeing Abhani for the first time. 'Handsome, upright, as a woman of House Vi should be. I see you, Abhani Lus. You are like me. I too was proud and headstrong. Unbridled power was my reward. So too was this watery prison. Master your impulsive nature, or it will be your undoing.' The hand squeaked down the glass and vanished back into the murk. 'I am glad to see you, but you have much to learn. We are family and

remember that counts for much, but remember also that always, always Legio comes first.'

'I swear I shall learn,' said Abhani. 'I shall redouble my efforts. Triple them. I am sorry.'

'Give me the satisfaction of pride in your maturity, not apologies for its lack. Now go, granddaughter of mine. I wish to speak to your mother. May the Machine-God guide you to better understanding, and watch over the functioning of your machine.'

The door opened. Abhani bowed, and made her way back out of the cramped confines of the czella. The door shut behind her.

'You still have not told her, last of my daughters,' said Mohana Mankata Vi when she and Esha were alone.

'No. I never will. She cannot know.'

In the tank, Mohana Mankata Vi's head moved within its nest of cables.

'Maybe that is for the best. Maybe it would have been for the best even were we not at war. Abhani Lus abhors the Death Stalkers, as any woman of our Legio should, but her hatred of Vulpa surpasses that of any other huntress. This is the mark of her father. Vulpa are a vengeful, angry breed. Perhaps, I wonder, does she know, deep down?' She paused. 'But then who needs any other reason to hate the Death Stalkers, their being what they are. The Legio Vulpa are cruel warriors.'

'They are not alone,' said Esha. 'There has always been a surfeit of cruelty among the armies of the Emperor.'

'Do you defend our erstwhile allies, daughter?'

'I do not,' said Esha. She looked above the Great Mother, where the glass narrowed, and the great bundle of cabling that kept her alive entered through a thin neck of glass collared in metal. 'What they did was indefensible. Even before they turned traitor their methods were questionable.' She looked at the greyish blob that was Mohana Mankata Vi's head. She wondered what the old woman must look like. Esha had been born so long after Mohana Mankata Vi had been submerged in the tank, the last of her frozen ova successfully brought to term, that she had never seen her mother as a young woman. She had seen picts, and it was said by those who had known Mohana when she was still mortal that Esha resembled her a great deal. Esha's imagination, usually so ruthlessly subordinated to the task of commanding her Reaver, filled in for her a picture of horrific decrepitude, of skin so loose it hung like wet, white cloth, and eyes shrivelled to black fruit pits. She had never been able to see her mother as

anything other than a crone, and she saw the same fate approaching for herself in the mirror as age laid its siege lines over her face. ‘I do question if they ever had much choice. If any of us did.’

Mohana Mankata Vi’s voxmitter let out a curious electronic blurt. Perhaps it took the place of a sigh. It was doubtful the machine priests had included mental pattern recognition for something so human as a meaningful exhalation. To many of them, such a human, flesh-bound thing would appear devoid of informational content. It chilled Esha how far the priests of their religion had diverged from humanity.

‘I think that sometimes,’ said Mohana Mankata Vi. ‘But I am in error doing so. All the achievements and woes of my life stem from one instant of decision. You are familiar with how I became Grand Master?’

‘Of course,’ said Esha. She hesitated. ‘Great Mother, I have heard the story a score of times from you yourself.’

The Great Mother was silent for a moment. ‘I am growing forgetful. A consequence of old age,’ she said. ‘I could have left the prize behind. Instead I took it up. All this would have been otherwise had I not. Legio Solaria would have been a very different Legio. It would not bear the cognomen of the Imperial Hunters, were its engines not piloted by experts of the hunt. If the Knights rather than the huntresses of House Vi had given their gene stock and traditions to Tigris, perhaps it would be no better an order than the Death Stalkers. But we shall never know, because that did not happen.’

‘Indeed not,’ said Esha.

‘Do you believe in fate?’ asked the Great Mother.

Esha shifted slightly. She clasped her hands behind her back, and straightened her spine.

‘You are uncomfortable answering,’ said the Great Mother. ‘A large percentage of the apocrypha to the Sixteen Universal Laws wrestle with this conundrum.’

‘Law eight – the Omnissiah knows all, comprehends all.’

‘Quite. If he knows and comprehends all, then by definition the Machine-God’s plan is knowable and comprehensible. By extension, if the Machina Cosma operates to predictable principles, then those principles can be known and comprehended. The universe is a code to be deciphered, according to this philosophy, if one can but reach the highest level of comprehension.’

Esha said nothing. To state an opinion either way was to put oneself into the camp of one of the major divisions within the erstwhile Mechanicum.

‘I do not believe that all is knowable,’ said Mohana Mankata Vi. ‘The Machine-

God made mankind to understand the mysteries of his creation. What would be the point of that if we had no choice, but rolled like steel bearings down the paths of a random decision generator? I have come to decide that my actions were not fated. That moment on that glorious day I could have ridden aside from the chase. I could have chosen not to take my horse out in the first place. I could have watched the Knights cross the finishing line from the stand with my sisters and mother. But I was a huntress, so I did go out. I am impulsive, and I chafed against the restrictions of our culture, so when the time came and my brother dropped the trophy, I made the decision to pick it up. I did not feel guided. I did not feel it was inevitable. I remember making that decision, daughter. There was no great cosmic weight bearing down on me, forcing me to do it. I chose to, as surely as a hunter chooses to loose his arrow at his quarry, or not. As surely as you choose the moment to unleash the solar furies of your plasma destroyer. It was my choice, Esha.'

Mohana floated close to the glass front of her tank again. 'Choices are made by men and women all over the galaxy every single moment of every single day. These are conscious moments of decision. They are what drives history onwards. It is man's will that beats the path of time, not the designs of gods, or fate, or whatever you wish to call it. I am my own mistress. That is why we, of all the species in the galaxy, are the favoured of the Machine-God and made in his holy image. Nothing dictates what I shall do. I command gods in his name. They do not command me. Do you understand?'

'As you say, mother,' said Esha, bowing her head respectfully. 'I have understood since the beginning.'

Mohana Mankata Vi drifted back in the murk. 'You were always among the cleverest. I am proud of you. You know that it is will that allows us to master the Titans. You are possessed of it in abundance. It is a rare gift, and so I have made another choice.'

Esha looked up.

'It is time for me to name my successor as Grand Master of the Legio Solaria. I have decided that you should bear the mantle. This is my pronouncement. Let it be so from this moment forth. You are the heir apparent.'

For once, Esha lost her composure. Her stance loosened. 'Why me? I am not the best warrior, or the best leader. There are others that are worthier.'

'I disagree. You are leader of Second Maniple and you are the last of my true daughters.'

'Continuity is powerful symbolically,' said Esha. 'But it is no justification for

my naming as your heir.'

'Daughter, there have been better princeps in this Legio, and there have been better leaders. But of those of us surviving, you possess both qualities in the best proportions. You will do this, for I so command. I will announce my decision soon. I thought it kinder to let you know in advance.'

'Do you think you will fall in battle?' Esha asked. 'Is the situation so dire that even you fear for the Legio?'

The Great Mother laughed loudly. The machinery enabling her to speak was confounded by the strength of her humour, and interpreted it as a barking, synthetic warble.

'I have no fear for my engines or my daughters! We are the Legio Solaria! Never has a foe bested us. Never have we turned our face from battle. By our blood and our will the Legio will persist for all time.'

'Then why now?' she asked. 'Why name me as your successor?'

'I called you here with Abhani Lus because I wished to see you together. This could be the last time that grandmother, mother and daughter are present at once. It is selfish, but I am still human. I am the last of the founding mothers. An era is passing for our order, for better or for worse. But I have no fear for the Legio, Esha, because it will be in safe hands. Your hands.'

'Then what is happening?'

'You know what is happening. Say it aloud.'

'I cannot,' said Esha. But she had known since she had seen the candles in the sally port, and the unfinished equations. She dropped her head. To name it was to make it real.

'Then I shall say it,' said Mohana Mankata Vi proudly. 'I am dying, my daughter, and I do not have long left.'

THIRTEEN

Dark Mechanicum

Brightness made Harrtek's headaches worse. Between battles he craved darkness. The lumens in his room lacked a dimming function. They glared in his face spitefully. One night, when drunk, he methodically broke all of them but one. The last he covered over with a sheet of red cloth. The result was a dark, bloody glow the same as the combat lighting of *Nuntio Dolores*' czella. It comforted and disturbed him in equal measure. His body needled him with a hundred little pains. His head pounded. His soul urged him into communion with his machine.

He refused to give in. His will was stronger than his cravings.

It was the middle of the night watch. Harrtek stared at his patchwork trophy flag in the ruddy dark. He drank from a spherical glass of amasec that shook in his hands. He felt sick, unable to eat. The squares in the flag were all the same colour in the red light, hard to tell apart – meaningless, even. They seemed a poor way to commemorate his victories. The skulls within his Warlord's czella and mounted upon its carapace pediment were more fitting. Perhaps he should…

'Why, by Terra, would I want to mount skulls in my sleeping quarters?' he muttered to himself. He sipped the amasec. His sense of taste was dulled; the subtle flavours of the alcohol escaped him. All that was left was the burn at the back of the throat. He took little pleasure from the flavour or the effects, but stolidly drank it anyway.

He rubbed at his head. His hair had been falling out so quickly of late that he

had shaved the remainder off. His fingers traced the differing texture of scar-smooth skin and the velvety patches where hair still grew. He found it soothing, and he fell into a trance balanced between calmness and the raging agony of his headache.

The door chime sang. He had a visitor.

'Go away,' he said, not loud enough for anyone but himself to hear.

The door opened, flooding the room with weak lumen glow from the corridor that was, to Harrtek's eyes, unbearably bright. A shadow fell across the patchwork flag.

'What do you want, Casson?' said Harrtek. He didn't look at the door, but it could have been no one else. Only his servant had access to the lock codes.

'Good evening, princeps majoris.' The voice was unfamiliar, age-cracked and haughty.

'You're not Casson.' Harrtek twisted around in his chair. The motion brought a wave of nausea. Alkali saliva flooded his mouth. His stomach turned and he swallowed the rising vomit. He was drunker than he had thought.

An adept of the New Mechanicum entered his room. He was tall, but unnaturally thin, and his lower body was of a shape that suggested a form of locomotion other than legs. The hem of the black robes that covered him from head to foot stirred around him with a life of its own.

He raised a delicate, silver hand.

'Ah, the problems of idleness. Legio Solaria withdraw, and you have nothing to fight.'

'I am resting,' said Harrtek.

'You are drinking, princeps majoris.'

'It is better than taking more combat stimms. One addiction is enough for me.' Harrtek automatically rose the glass to his lips but did not sip. He thought better of drinking more, and set the glass on a side table where the bottle of amasec stood. 'We go into battle soon. Iridium will be ours.'

'You know that's not true. We lack the fleet to defy theirs, and so cannot press our advantage in engine numbers. Things are as they were before, in deadlock. I would like to change that.'

'Wouldn't we all,' said Harrtek rancorously.

'Perhaps I should come back on another occasion, although your servant assured me this was a good time to find you.'

'Bloody Casson. He has no right to say who can and who cannot visit me.'

Harrtek turned his chair about and looked at the tech-priest. The corridor light

burned his eyes, the priest a shifting silhouette against it. Harrtek's discomfort was obvious enough, so the tech-priest moved aside. The throbbing purr of a small grav motor stung Harrtek's head.

Without the priest to block the light, it fell on Harrtek with full force. He held up his hand. The tech-priest went to the corner of his room and hovered there, a nightmare apparition. Harrtek wondered if he was, indeed, asleep.

'What do you want with me?'

'I come with an offer.'

Harrtek snorted. 'It must be a bad one, for you to be sneaking around in the dead of the late watch.'

'Night and day make no difference to me,' said the priest. 'Dark and light are one of many divisions that are arbitrary and limiting, as they so evidently are aboard this station. There is no night and day here, only what is imposed by us. Victory and defeat are similar. They are choices. You wish for victory. I have a new way to gain it. Choose victory.'

'What a stupid thing to say,' said Harrtek. 'Any princeps wants victory.'

'Not so much as you,' said the priest. 'You are driven. You have a cause.'

'Don't we all have a cause?'

'Not as personal as yours.'

'What are you talking about? Do you think me worried the others censure me for withdrawing? Wesselek's Maniple Eighteen are alive only because of what I did. He covers his shame with mockery.'

'I am not talking about that. You were right to pull back, objectively speaking.'

'What then, objectively speaking, are you talking about?' Harrtek snarled.

'Your offspring.'

Harrtek turned his face out of the light. His migraine built. He abandoned his attempts at moderation, grabbed up his drink and downed it in one. It helped a little.

'Legio Solaria bitches,' he gasped. 'One bore me a child. She gave it to the damn priesthood, practically laughed in my face about it. He would have been a fierce warrior, I am sure, had he been born into this Legio. Now what is he? A servitor? At best a mumbling, obsessive caster of nuts and bolts, drawing patterns in oil to guess at the ailments of machines.'

He glanced at the cowled figure hovering in the corner.

'No offence,' he said insincerely.

'Do you know why we wear black?' asked the priest.

'I genuinely do not care,' said Harrtek. 'Get out.'

‘We wear black to forget Mars,’ said the priest, making no move towards the door. ‘Your assessment is correct. The old Mechanicum are obsessed with meaningless ritual. They are cowards. They are too scared to uncover the truth. Black is the colour of the void. It is the colour of eternity. It is the colour of the ignorance we wish to abolish with the light of knowledge.’

‘Why not wear white then, if you’re so illuminated?’ said Harrtek sarcastically.

‘We will, when our task is done and all is known, and not one scrap of knowledge lies beyond the grasp of the New Mechanicum. You are correct to be disdainful of the so-called Adeptus Mechanicus, these colleagues of mine who have abandoned all claim to independence. The Emperor would deny us the full measure of the Machine-God’s knowledge. Now we are free to take it. The last doubts have been removed. But until the time that all is known, we will wear black as a reminder that darkness enwraps the minds of men. By our efforts, out of ignorance shall rise bliss. I am here to ask you to join me on this quest. I know, I know,’ he held up his silver hands in a display of modesty, ‘it is quite the opportunity.’

Harrtek laughed. ‘What a fine pitch, my friend.’ He picked up the bottle. The neck rattled against the glass as he poured. ‘But I’m not buying. I have heard better from street hawkers. If that kind of thing worked on me, this room would be full of gewgaws and silk scarves from a hundred worlds.’ He looked around pointedly. ‘As you can see, it does not work on me. Now get out of here – your damn grav impeller is making my headache worse.’

The magos’ augmetics made a disturbing growling sound. The movement of his robes calmed, and he sank closer to the floor, though still he did not touch it, and he did not leave.

‘Are your aural sensors in bad function?’ said Harrtek sarcastically. ‘Out!’

‘I assure you my hearing is far superior to yours. Allow me to tell you a story.’

‘Marvellous,’ barked Harrtek. His feet slammed into the floor and he stood unsteadily. He forced himself to appear more sober than he felt, and moved on the priest. ‘If you’re not going to hover out, I’ll push you out, and don’t give me admonishments of blasphemy. I’m a loyal disciple of the triple god, but I’m more drunk now than I am devout.’

Harrtek reached for the priest. His hand got no closer than a decimetre before his entire body locked up. His implants burned, and a buzzing pain gripped his nerves, sending his muscles into spasm lock. His teeth clacked loudly as his jaw snapped shut.

‘I am going to tell you a story,’ said the priest, ‘and you are going to listen.

When I have finished, you will be intrigued enough to hear me out. Once you have heard me out, you will agree to my request, I promise you. I will assume your agreement, seeing as you cannot currently speak.'

Harrtek made a strangled noise that was most definitely not of agreement. The priest ignored him.

'There are many of my people who still cling to their oaths to the Emperor. They are misguided. The Emperor is not the Omnissiah, the Machine-God made flesh, but a trickster of the gravest sort whose actions go against all we of Mars have fought for since the Age of Technology came to a close in fire and death. We are the disciples of knowledge, and the Emperor has the gall to come to our world, to conquer us in all but name, and lay down the lore on what is forbidden and what is not. The Crimson Accords are nothing but chains. Now we of the New Mechanicum are free of them, we have learned many secrets He would have denied us.

'I think an introduction is in order now, yes? My name is Ardim Protos. I am fortunate to count myself the first of the followers of Sota Nul, emissary of the New Mechanicum to the Warmaster, and representative of the Fabricator General Kelbor-Hal. I find myself humbled by the honours given me, for she has seen fit to make me a member of her synod.' He chuckled self-deprecatingly. 'I work hard to prove her faith in me just.

'Our denomination of the Cult Mechanicus is concerned with the power of the empyrean. You know a little of this, I think. Apostle Vorrjuk Kraal has done a fine job in spreading the truth of the universe to your Legio,' he said, referring to the Word Bearer attached to the Legio Vulpa as spiritual adviser. 'He preaches the creed of the old gods to you, and I note that your warrior cadres have taken to honouring the one known as Khorne, the god of war. This is probably wise – it is best not to upset them,' said Ardim Protos. 'What Lorgar's fanatics have not seen is that these gods are nothing compared to the power and the majesty of the Machine-God. Already, members of our growing cult are using the grace of the Omnissiah – the true Omnissiah, not Terra's false prophet – to harness the might of the warp. Geller fields, warp missiles, void shields, all these things you are familiar with. But their underlying principles can be turned to so much more. Through novel exploitations of these technologies we will gain mastery first over the energies of the empyrean, then over the lesser entities, until finally the very gods themselves will bend the knee and recognise the supremacy of the Machine-God, though I say that to you in confidence. One wouldn't wish them to find out.'

He laughed drily. ‘He, unlike they, is master of both realities, materium and immaterium, for the rule of his lores holds sway in both. Veritably, we of the New Mechanicum are fortunate, liberated from a false god to witness the truth of reality.

‘What I am here to offer you is a place in this. There are other beings who inhabit the oceans of the empyrean. They can be caught, and bound into machineries in the mortal realm. Do you understand me? Grunt once for yes, twice for no.’

Harrtek grunted once. Saliva that had gathered in his mouth flooded down his chin.

‘Good. My intention is to create the greatest engine of war ever seen.’ He held up one mechanical hand, palm up. ‘A Warlord Titan.’ He held up the other. ‘The soul of a greater warp entity.’ He brought them together with a metallic clap. ‘Together, an engine of furious destruction. With its machine-spirit replaced by the essence of a being of the warp, the god-machine will function with greater efficiency and respond with greater alacrity. You do not know me, Princeps Majoris Terent Harrtek, but I know you. You have been chosen as a fine candidate for this process. Imagine, if you will, fusion not with the near-living mind of a Titan, but touching the soul of a demigod with your own.’ He leaned closer. ‘Tempting, yes? I will release you now.’

A loud snap emanated from the adept’s robes, and the pain holding Harrtek in place went out. Harrtek dropped to his hands and knees on the floor and vomited loudly.

‘How disappointingly biological.’ Protos floated backwards away from Harrtek as he heaved liquid upon the floor.

‘This is madness,’ said Harrtek. He got up shakily, wiping his mouth on the sleeve of his uniform. ‘I have seen these things in action. They are deadly xenos, uncontrollable.’

‘They are not xenos as you would understand it,’ said Protos. ‘But they are dangerous, if handled incorrectly. What I offer to you is not without precedent. It was done, once, on Astagar. It can work.’

The name was familiar to Harrtek. ‘One of the Ultramaran worlds?’

‘Quite so. A single Titan given a true soul, the result of sorcery and prayer. Alas, the work was undertaken by the Seventeenth Legion alone, not supported by a magos of the arts like myself. The machine was unstable, and ultimately defeated by the Thirteenth Legion Astartes.’

‘Then why do it?’

‘Because, though flawed, the engine of Astagar was a glorious thing,’ said Protos. ‘It showed us the possibilities. We have refined the science. Our way is better. Stable. *Permanent.* Sota Nul herself perfected the process. She really is quite inspiring. She did the final experiments on herself.’

‘If that is true, she is insane.’

‘She is powerful. She is anointed.’

‘Madness,’ said Harrtek. ‘The beings of the warp are abominations.’

‘You follow this religion yourself, you realise,’ said Protos.

‘There are limits to devotion,’ said Harrtek. ‘My first master is the Machine-God.’

‘And the god of war?’

‘A useful ally, nothing more,’ said Harrtek.

‘Then you say no to my proposal?’

‘The problem with you priests is that you never take a hint. I say no. Get out.’

‘A pity. You can become more than a man. I offer you godhood. I offer you freedom from these difficulties you are experiencing.’ He gestured at Harrtek’s head, his shaking hands. ‘You are ill, yes? Your order seeks close bonds with their god-engines, and that is a laudable goal, but the MIU was never intended to bring man and machine into perfect union. You push the limits of its capabilities, and of yourself. These pains, the sickness, the headaches, the palsy… I can take these away. I can give you what every princeps of the Legio Vulpa has sought since its patent was granted. I can bring you into full union with god, forever.’

‘There is a light year’s distance between becoming a god-machine for a while, and losing yourself in it forever.’

A wrinkled, human face emerged from the darkness of Protos’ cowl. It was so old it had come full circle and once again looked like that of an infant: toothless, pink and smooth. The gleam of malicious intelligence in Protos’ eyes was sinister as he looked pointedly at Harrtek’s dishevelment, and the puddle on the floor.

‘I suppose there is,’ he said archly. ‘What a shame it would be to leave all this behind.’

‘I will not do it, said Harrtek.

‘You will come around. Your sickness will only get worse. You should be happy, Terent Harrtek. You suffer because you come closer to your Legio’s goal than most, but what we truly desire is rarely what it best for us, and it will kill you, in the end. Your Titan is fighting you, yes? It will get worse. There will come a moment when you will lose control.’

‘Get out!’ shouted Harrtek.

‘There is a surprise we have engineered for any who might turn the Iridium toehold into an advantage. Once you have seen what we are capable of, you will desire the change.’

‘I said get out,’ he said. Harrtek put his hand upon the butt of his laspistol. ‘Now.’

‘You have no conception yet of what I am offering you.’ Protos gave him a knowing look. ‘Ah well. I’ll be seeing you.’ The grav motor puttered to a higher pitch. He lifted up from the floor, and floated out of the door.

Eyes screwed up against the meagre light, Harrtek slapped blindly at the door panel until the door closed, rested his back against it and sank to the floor. He stayed there for an hour before calling Casson to clear his stinking vomit away.

PART TWO
BETA-GARMON III

FOURTEEN

Broken Hive

Grey fog swirled around *Cursor Ferro*'s armoured eyes as it hunted for the lost Titan. Owing to its role as a scout, a Warhound had big windows where its larger kin had only tiny ports or lacked viewing apertures altogether. The oculi did not help in the murk. Large droplets undulated past the thick armourglass, dipping and swimming like a shoal of living things. Dark shapes came and went. With human vision, it was impossible to say if they were solid objects or thicker patches of vapour turning back upon themselves to create the illusion of form. Jehani Jehan heard the restless sea, and felt the drag of water upon *Cursor Ferro*'s feet as the swell washed over them, but her eyes saw nothing through the grey.

Jehani Jehan relied upon her Warhound's systems. *Cursor Ferro*'s senses extended far beyond the limitations of flesh. Infrared penetrated the fog perfectly well. A pair of illuminators set into the muzzle of the scout shone invisible light for the machine's broad-spectrum augurs. The grainy view on the forward vid screen was the same as the one fed directly into Jehani Jehan's mind: a grim coastline of broken, metal cliffs topped with deadly badlands of razored scrap impossible for god-engines to traverse. Sluggish waves pounded on the metal, calling forth mournful booms from newly made sea caves. None of this had existed a few months ago. It was a vista born of destruction, the remains of Jinsu Hive toppled into the Chymist's Sea.

The Warhound skirted reefs of rockcrete and plasteel. Its feet stamped three-

toed pools into the sand. Waves rushed in to smooth them out, collapsing the sides, wiping away the Titan's spoor. The bigger waves rushed around its greaves, reaching up foaming arms that collapsed into spume before they touched the waist. Splashes from the highest spattered against the Warhound's viewports. Sensitive monitoring instruments warned of the ocean's high alkalinity, and the dangerous build-up of corrosive salts upon the Titan's casing. The fog, too, was caustic.

'Visibility four metres,' said steersman moderati Natandi Fahl. 'I recommend a reduction in speed.'

'Denied,' said Jehani. 'Keep up the pace. The tide is coming in. There's not much time for us to investigate the signal.'

'As you command, princeps,' said Natandi Fahl.

Jehani's mind was half-in, half-out of the Warhound's world. She let her soul take respite in her flesh, away from the burdens of controlling the machine. *Cursor Ferro* was content to run. The rhythm of its stride and the sway of the head as it swept back and forth rocked Jehani pleasantly. Calm reigned. Though she remained at the edge of full manifold link, Jehani touched the minds of her moderati. She felt it as Ophira Mendev in left gunnery control stifled a yawn. The edge had gone from her vigilance.

Jehani supposed she should bring her crew back into deeper cohesion, but she let them relax. Since arriving on Beta-Garmon III there had been no rest. Every day saw another battle. Nobody on either side seemed to have a grasp on strategy. Traitor formations came in at random, all types. But they were relentless. Whether intentionally or not, their attacks were wearing down the Legio.

The transponder pulsed on the edge of her awareness. Not far now. The electronic signature song of a missing Legio Defensor Titan.

She regretted the approaching conclusion to the mission. She enjoyed the distance from Esha far more than freedom from battle. The years of their friendship were so far back in the past. What memories she had of it became more shrivelled and grotesque as time passed, like a mummifying corpse. Esha should have released her to another maniple – it is what she would have done – but Esha was stubborn as well as condescending, and would not let her go.

Two decades later, she was still clinging on.

There was no fighting around Jinsu Hive any more. It had been burning when Legio Solaria made planetfall. Temperatures were so high the metal itself was ablaze, the tech-priests said. The eight-thousand metre height of the hive acted

like a giant chimney, funnelling fire through its guts with the efficacy of a blast furnace. For two weeks it had burned on the horizon like a giant sacrificial bonfire, hiding the sun with toxic gases, until it had collapsed in the dead of night. The spires of the uppermost levels crashed down into the midhive; the midhive compacted into the underhive. High towers toppled into the sea in a new promontory laid out like a sleeping giant's corpse.

Three hundred million people had died there. Jehani Jehan could hardly imagine what that many people would look like. She had tried conjuring graphical representations through *Cursor Ferro*'s cogitators. Even they, with clearly marked comparators, could not convey the scale of the loss of life, and Jinsu was just one hive on one world. The death toll was unremarkable in the Garmon Cluster. Innumerable people had died, billions on Beta-Garmon II alone. There were adepts at the camp whose role it was to record these things. They struggled. Outside the adepta, in the rank and file, a name had arisen for this stupendous cull of humanity. It was simple, direct, apt enough to cross the boundaries between the various military organisations and the ranks within.

They were calling it the Great Slaughter.

Jehani Jehan shuddered at the name. The glory days of the crusade seemed so long ago. Her experiences in the conquest of recalcitrant human civilisations and the extermination of alien life were rendered irrelevant in the moment of the Warmaster's betrayal. No one could prepare for this kind of war. Total, all devouring, merciless. Preservation of life and infrastructure went by the wayside. She had heard some Imperial commanders were bombing their own cities, killing thousands to destroy a handful of enemies. The Garmon Cluster was sinking into blood madness. Legio of both sides operated without restraint. The devastation they caused was horrifying. She had been proud of her god-engine. Now she feared it a little. Arrogant by nature, Jehani Jehan found new character traits soon after her first engagement with another Legio. She had discovered caution.

She slipped deeper into *Cursor Ferro*'s mind. The Legio Defensor identification signal called to her. Bodily fatigue receded. She was lifted up by *Cursor Ferro*'s uncomplaining strength, but even so she needed to disconnect soon. She needed sleep. Her head throbbed and she felt sluggish. Her response times were way down, her thoughts thick and syrupy.

She concentrated, forcing herself to think. Readings could be falsified. It would not be the first time a friendly signum had been used as a lure in an ambush, but it had to be inspected.

‘Hard right,’ she ordered, mentally forcing the head to turn as she issued the command.

They would follow the signal. She chose a roundabout path around the newborn coast, and let herself blend further into *Cursor Ferro*’s being.

Cursor Ferro’s neural jack dragged at the back of Jehani’s skull. Her neck muscles ached with the effort of supporting it. Her thoughts strayed to Legio Vulpa more and more often. The day at Biphex when Vulpa had given them a glimpse of their true nature had been a foretaste of what was to come. She had known from the moment the Legios met each other that Vulpa were callous.

In the aftermath, it was not only relations with Legio Vulpa that had been poisoned. The crews had changed. The machines had changed. God-machines were engineered for war, but though their souls were aggressive, every engine took on the imprint of its pilots, and over time, as echoes of dozens of women were left upon them their personalities were shaped one way or another. The war machines of Legio Solaria had been as disgusted at Vulpa’s actions as the crews.

Emotions were intensified and reflected back onto their crews by the manifold. The moment Vulpa showed their true colours, Jehani Jehan’s friendship with Esha Ani Mohana had come to an end.

Jehani told herself she was ashamed to have shown weakness in front of her princeps. She had panicked when Vulpa walked into Biphex. But the real reason was Abhani Lus. It was always Abhani.

When she had found out about the pregnancy, she had been glad for her friend. Things were different then. Before Biphex.

‘I’m with child,’ Esha had told her. She came straight out with it one evening.

It had been a day of sunlight, a few months before their transit to Dendritica, and the first steps on the path that led them to Biphex.

‘Are you serious?’ Jehani said. She was reading in an alcove of a high window looking out over the tiered paddy fields of Barcan’s World. There had been time for leisure, once upon a time.

‘Absolutely.’ Esha’s face glowed with the news. Jehani smiled. Her friend might have looked ecstatic but Jehani had been around women when they had discovered they were unexpectedly pregnant. Shock was the first emotion, every single time; whether they hid it or not, they felt it.

‘How?’ said Jehani. She laid her book face down on the cushion. Barcan’s World was a pretty planet, or rather, what was left of it after compliance was pretty. Light reflected off the stepped fields in sinuous bends over the moulded

plaster ceiling.

Esha smiled.

Jehani's eyes widened. 'No! That princeps with Vulpa? Harrtek?'

'You needn't say it like I'm about to elope. It was but the once. He is too sure of himself for me to pursue the relationship.'

'Coming from a Titan princeps, that is a statement rich in irony,' Jehani said. She picked up her book again.

'No congratulations?' said Esha.

Jehani looked over the top of the book. 'Congratulations.'

'You're not happy for me,' said Esha. She sat down beside her friend.

'Now that's your hormones talking. Machine, Force and Omnissiah alone knows what they'll do to *Bestia Est*. Have you ever been aboard a broody war engine?' She shook her head. 'I have.'

'Jehani, please,' said Esha. She was upset. That was not like her.

'I am sorry,' Jehani reached out a hand and clasped Esha's. 'Seriously. I meant it.'

'Then you are pleased?'

'So long as I don't have to help you raise the thing, I am very pleased.'

'What are you reading?'

'Some religious tract I found on one of the duluz. *Lectitio Divinitatus*. It's very ornate. A hard read.'

'Is it interesting?'

'In a disturbing kind of way. These people believe the Emperor is a god in his own right. Not the Omnissiah, something else. Completely against the Cult Mechanicus and the Imperial Truth.'

'Really?' Esha frowned.

'Really,' Jehani said.

'You better get rid of it.'

'I suppose.' She looked at the cover. 'What are you going to do with the child?'

'What do you mean?'

'Come on, you have to think about it. Will it remain with us or go to them? What agreement did you reach?'

'No gene-contract was exchanged,' said Esha. 'It really was unexpected.'

'I don't know, something was exchanged,' said Jehani with a smirk. 'So this is totally unofficial?'

'Completely. A spur of the moment tryst.'

'Will she join us?'

‘If it is a she. If not, then he’ll go to the priesthood.’

‘Cog and tooth! You didn’t even choose the sex?’ said Jehani.

‘I did not plan for this to happen, I keep saying.’

‘Then tell me,’ Jehani said. ‘When did it happen? Where?’

‘Before the greeting banquet,’ she hesitated. ‘At the Moment of Exchange. In the Hall of Armaments.’

‘Esha!’ said Jehani, mock scandalised. ‘And where the god-machines could see. You should be ashamed.’ She was joking, mostly.

Esha laughed. ‘What use is life if you don’t live it a little every now and then?’

Now, years later, Jehani Jehan reflected on those words. There was no time to live any more, only fight to survive. Esha’s quiet joy at the child’s imminence turned to shame when ties were broken with Legio Vulpa. Jehani had grown cold towards her when she had decided to carry the baby to term. She admitted it freely. It seemed harsh, but it was as it was. A friendship forged in the manifold was among the strongest of all. Their estrangement had hurt them both, but she could not countenance welcoming the genes of that Legio into the Imperial Hunters. She still struggled. Ironically, she had nothing personal against Abhani. She was a good princeps, if a little headstrong. It was the principle of the thing.

Esha had put herself before the Legio. She could never forgive that.

‘Legio first,’ she said to herself. ‘Always, Legio first.’

‘Princeps,’ Natandi Fahl spoke tersely. ‘Princeps. Ahead. Princeps! You are drifting.’

‘All halt.’ Natandi Fahl spoke out, and brought the Titan to a stop. *Cursor Ferro* reluctantly complied. It set its legs firm against the surging of the ocean.

‘What is happening?’ Jehani Jehan dragged her attention away from her memories.

‘You were machine-lost. *Cursor Ferro* requires guidance here – he would have walked on into danger were it not for me.’

Natandi Fahl was too sure of herself. She had her sights set on Jehani’s throne.

‘I am in control,’ Jehani said.

‘See for yourself, princeps. Ahead. Our way is blocked.’

The visual feed was never deactivated, but a princeps was fed so much information they were trained to compartmentalise it. To see what the Titan saw though her eyes, she had to focus; her attention had to be active. She looked within herself. Through *Cursor Ferro*’s auguries she saw a cliff extending upwards into the sky. There was a slight curve to it, but besides that it was

featureless, a single, giant slab of plasteel bonded rockcrete. Part of the outer shell of the fallen hive.

'Your orders, princeps?'

Jehani had *Cursor Ferro* pace around to face the coast. The wall-cliff sliced through the debris that made up the new shoreline, laying down a mighty headland. Water sucked itself into churning eddies around skerries of metal and shattered rockcrete. Within the compacted mass of the cliff was evidence of cavities, machine halls and great conduits crushed down to the size of ration tins. There was no way through in that direction.

The water was deepening by the moment. Waves rocked *Cursor Ferro* as the tide came in.

'Go out.'

'Princeps?'

'Deeper. Go out into the sea. Take us around the obstruction.'

'The water will cover us over,' said Kalis Nen, *Cursor Ferro*'s moderati oratorius.

'The cliffs are impassable. This machine is proof against the void. Water cannot harm it. Eighty degrees right. Now.'

'As you command, princeps,' said Natandi Fahl.

Jehani let Natandi Fahl pilot the Titan without her direct input. She kept her mind above the manifold, watching as much through the Titan's cockpit windows as through its eyes. The mist was thinning. The cliff was visible intermittently through the oculus. Now seen with human sight, the view was as grey and miserable as it had appeared in monochrome heat vision.

'Turn executed.'

'Relinquish control,' Jehani ordered Fahl. She pushed her mind deeper into the link with the machine. The Titan and she came close to full union, and together they walked into the ocean.

The seabed shelved off quickly. The new cliffs had forced the coast far out into the water, and though the Chymist's Sea's sublittoral region had a gentle slope, the edge of the continental shelf was close. Within a hundred steps the water rose to *Cursor Ferro*'s waist. As it waded forwards it collected the rubbish of industry ejected into the water over millennia. Long-lived plasteks yellowed by exposure to the sun joined together with the carbonised debris of the hive's demise into a raft of rubbish around the Titan.

'Soundings indicate the shelf ends close to the edge of the barrier,' said Kalis Nen.

‘We have seen it,’ said Jehani Jehan. Her eyes were closed. Her primary sensory input was that of the Titan. *Cursor Ferro*’s simple soul merged with her own. ‘We proceed.’

The water came up to the Titan’s head. The cliff seemed no more negotiable. Waste-choked water slapped at the Titan’s canine muzzle. The waves touched the base of its viewports.

‘Seal atmospheric vents,’ ordered Jehani. ‘Prepare cooling systems for density change.’

The bigger waves washed over the windows, getting higher and higher. The top of the armourglass showed clear air near the top, a submarine view in the rest; the clear, well-defined line of the water’s meniscus divided the two. Then that sliver of air was gone. The head plunged beneath the surface, and only the curved back of the Warhound remained above water.

The sound of the reactor shifted as its cooling systems took on water instead of air. The shimmer of exhaust heat was replaced by a blast of roaring steam that subsided to a bubble as it submerged completely. Now entirely underwater, the Titan leaned forward to better push against the resistance of the sea.

‘The edge of the shelf is close. Water depth increases greatly nine hundred and thirty metres from our position, increasingly more so thereafter,’ said Kalis Nen.

‘I am aware,’ said Jehani Jehan. The clouded water was opaque even to the infrared, and she was forced to rely on high intensity sonar bursts. The contours of the seabed raced through her mind with each pulse. The seabed had buckled with pressure ridges under the weight of the hive, making the going difficult. Debris from the hive collapse worsened the situation. *Cursor Ferro* pushed on, unperturbed by the change in medium it moved through. The machine’s swaggering walk was exaggerated in the water, though it had ceased to swing its head back and forth, but pointed its nose in the direction of travel, changing the whole feel of the Titan’s motion.

The great, black guillotine blade of the hive section reared high beside them, its leading edge cutting the water as far as the machine could see. To their right the prospect was hardly lighter. A shift from black-brown to grey-brown was all that defined what was obstacle and what was open sea.

‘Edge of continental shelf forty metres,’ warned Kalis Nen. She too was deep in the manifold, and her voice was quiet.

‘We see the end!’ said Jehani. The artificial cliff ended abruptly, the top part sheared off by some apocalyptic starship weapon. At the surface, where the sun shone off the rolling waves, brighter metal glinted.

A narrow ledge ran in front of the wall, no more than fifteen metres wide. Beyond that the seabed plunged into the inky blackness of the mesopelagic zone.

'We go forwards,' said Jehani Jehan.

The Titan saw the danger, and moved cautiously. The blackness to its right seemed to move upwards from the deeps, poised to swallow them all.

Cursor Ferro walked in front of the promontory with a somnambulist's slow gait. To their left the strata of the hive shell were laid open for them to see. Six metres of plasteel bonded to rockcrete, then a thick ferrocrete layer honeycombed for strength and lightness, its cavities already being colonised by Beta-Garmon III's aquatic life. What remained of the world's native ecosystem was hardy enough to tolerate the polluted sea. The toxic corpse of the great hive posed it no difficulties.

'Steady,' said Jehani Jehan. Natandi Fahl lent her mental strength to guide the Titan.

Beyond the hive casing, scraps of the internal structure clung on, a briar patch of tangled metal that projected beyond the shell limit. Strong currents welled up from marine depths, mixing with the shore drift to create a mess of vortices. Thickets of metal swayed like weeds in the flow. *Cursor Ferro* slowed.

'Steady!' Jehani Jehan ordered.

The inferno cannon caught on a projecting spar and squealed along it. The Titan's foot slipped. The impact of metal on metal resounded up the Titan's left leg. *Cursor Ferro* tilted to the right. Through the right eye, the ocean waited. Jehani Jehan brought *Cursor Ferro* to a halt before it could topple over. Half a dozen tocsins sounded at once.

'Fouling around the left claw,' reported Ophira Mendev.

'We didn't see it,' said Jehani, speaking for the machine as much as herself. 'Kalis, integrate with the sensorium. Aid me.'

'Yes, princeps.'

With Kalis' help, the radar image sharpened enough for Jehani Jehan to see the snag of metal caught around *Cursor Ferro*'s ankle.

'I'll pull us out,' she said. 'Increase reactor output.'

The machine song deepened. The Titan tensed. The left leg pulled hard against the snare. Something gave, and *Cursor Ferro* lurched. Jehani brought her machine to another halt.

The right foot was at the edge of the abyss. Freedom lay fifty metres further on.

Machine-God, I beg of you, preserve your servants and your devices, she thought into the manifold. 'Full power to locomotors!' she commanded.

The whine of climbing power output sang in the cockpit, joining the trill of alarms in holy chorus.

The Titan leaned. Its left foot moved. Jehani took a step with the right, moving the claw away from the edge of the cliff. Machinery pushed to its limit howled its anguish through the Titan's structure.

Without warning, the snag gave way. *Cursor Ferro* lunged in the water, tottering out to the cliff edge again. It hung at the point of disaster as upwells of water buffeted it, before Jehani Jehan forced the machine back from the edge, and around the last of the obstacles.

Cursor Ferro picked up speed. The transponder signal throbbed in Jehani Jehan's mind. Aligning herself directly with the source, Jehani Jehan pushed the Titan back inshore.

Cursor Ferro emerged into a bay of metal. Brighter light, then air, appeared at the top of its oculi. A body banged into the armourglass. *Cursor Ferro*'s eyes revealed many more.

The water was carpeted with corpses. Thousands of them had been corralled by the currents in the new bay. They lolled on the waves, turning the ocean's churn into a lazy rolling. They were bloated by submersion, eaten at by the corrosive nature of the water. The ocean teemed with tiny crustaceans nibbling at this bounty. The water had become a soup.

While *Cursor Ferro* had been submerged, visibility had improved to several hundred metres. The carpet of corpses stretched into the distance.

Jehani Jehan ignored the dead, and marched onwards towards the shore of broken rockcrete and shorn metal. Waves threw corpses up onto the debris and plucked them back down. *Cursor Ferro* waded through the water and the flesh. Bodies thumped onto the czella. Water cascaded down its sides.

'The signal is ahead,' said Jehani Jehan.

They rounded a jagged island of tangled industrial machinery, into another bay full of corpses, and towards another headland. They turned back out to sea to pass it, facing out over an ocean sealed beneath human flesh, then back inshore again.

Passing the headland, they cleared the major part of the spire wreckage. The last shreds of mist were scudding away under a rising breeze. Sunlight broke through clouds of smoke. The greater body of the city was a black heap in the distance, studded with raging fires. Foothills of piled hablocks and outlying industrial facilities climbed up to the wreck. The remains of docks reached out

into the sea.

Carefully, *Cursor Ferro* picked its way through the ruins of millions of lives. The streets were choked with bones stripped of flesh by bio-weaponry. *Cursor Ferro*'s feet crushed them to powder. The signal of the missing Legio Defensor Titan squealed in the cockpit. They turned a corner, and the dead Titan was ahead, sprawled into the side of a warehouse, a greater corpse in a world of corpses.

Cursor Ferro stalked over to its fallen kin. The machine was a Rapier class scout, a lighter, swifter machine than even a Warhound.

'I've not seen one of these for a while,' said Fahl.

'The *Alacrity of Thought*. This is the missing engine. The transponder signal is standard Imperial recognition pattern,' said Kalis Nen.

'When did that start to mean something again?' asked Fahl. 'It could still be a trap.'

Jehani Jehan shut her eyes and reached through the maniple into *Cursor Ferro*'s extensive auspex suite. 'No sign of life, no mechanisms active. We are in the land of the dead. Bring us around it,' said Jehani Jehan. She shucked off her princeps harness and payed out the neural link cable so she could get close to the window. 'Halt.'

The Rapier was so much twisted wreckage. There was no chance its three moderati could have survived. The devastation was total. The weapon that had brought it low left little more than blackened adamantium bones and a portion of the torso.

'Whatever did this was powerful.' Jehani Jehan looked around. 'Do you have confirmation of identification?'

Kalis Nen frowned. 'There is weak activity from the Titan's infospheric links. I am attempting to boost it.'

Her hands moved over her station's manual control deck. Electronic screeching puttered out of the speakers, grew in volume and resolved itself into a tortured harmony of binharic.

Cursor Ferro's systems translated the sounds into words that lit themselves in trails of phosphor all over the czella's internal screens.

<I am the Titan *Alacrity of Thought*. I am no more. I am the Titan *Alacrity of Thought*. I am no more. I am the Titan *Alacrity of Thought*.>

Profound sorrow overtook the crew as they listened to the machine's lament. *Cursor Ferro* shifted on its great pistons. It stood erect, and scanned its hound's head across the desolate surroundings. There was not a living thing to be seen.

Jehani stared down at the wreck a moment longer, then returned to her throne.

'We have found what we came for. We will return to base.'

'There is no sign of the crew, Jehani,' said Kalis Nen. 'Should we look?'

'We will not find any,' she said. 'If they were not dead when the Titan fell, they will be now. Look at this place – it is a maze. The water is toxic. The air is barely breathable. There are no further signals. It would be unwise to linger here. Magos Perontius.' She depressed a manual vox switch in her throne, connecting her with the Titan's reactor chamber. 'Have you seen what *Cursor Ferro* sees?'

'I have.'

'Is the *Alacrity of Thought* salvageable?'

'Regrettably not,' the magos sighed. *'Do not let his remains and machine-spirit fall into the hands of our foe.'*

'I agree.' She clicked the voxlink off and settled back into her throne. 'Natandi, take us back and target the wreck. Ophira, Demonsany, fire at will.'

Cursor Ferro took a few paces backwards, knocking down the remnants of walls and walkways as it lined itself up on the dead Titan.

Jehani snapped the locks of her restraints closed and settled back into her throne.

'Fire,' she said.

A gout of flame gushed from the Titan's inferno cannon, heating *Alacrity of Thought*'s broken bones to a cherry red. The cabin vibrated as *Cursor Ferro*'s vulcan megabolters rotated up to firing speed.

Thousands of rounds slammed into the broken Titan, punching bright holes into its glowing hide. The lament died along with the last flickers of life in the machine.

'It's gone,' said Jehani. 'Turn us about. We depart.'

Cursor Ferro sang a dirge through its war-horns as it waded back into the sea of corpses.

FIFTEEN

Friends and Foes

Etan Boq came out of drugged sleep into a close, warm darkness without a single photon of light. His uniform stank of chemicals that made him want to retch.

'Hello?' he said. There was no reply. He reached about him in the pitch dark. His hands patted the warm bodies of other men. He felt down his front. He was still dressed in his uniform and webbing, but his gun was gone. They had even taken his bayonet, leaving him an empty sheath.

He shook the bodies. They had pulses, but they slept.

'Hello?' he said. 'Hello, can you hear me?'

'Quiet!' hissed a voice somewhere off to the left. In the dark it sounded closer than it was. 'They'll hear you,' the man whispered frantically. 'You don't want them to hear you.'

Etan Boq groped his way to the source of the voice. His foot rolled on the shin of an unconscious man and he fell onto more prone bodies. Wherever he was, it was packed full of men.

'Where are we?' he said.

'In the hold of the *Warding*.'

'We haven't even left the ship?'

His hand touched an ankle. 'Get off,' said the owner. The ankle withdrew itself quickly.

Etan turned to face the voice. 'Found you.'

‘Leave me alone!’

‘Not until you tell me what’s going on.’

‘Go away! I don’t want them to take me.’

‘Who are you?’

The man made a reluctant sound. ‘First Watcher Suruq Reming, fourth battalion.’

‘I don’t know you,’ said Etan Boq. ‘I’m Etan Boq.’

‘Well I don’t know you either. Now go *away!*’

‘Listen you, I’m a lieutenant.’ This was a lie. Etan was as lowly as you could get. ‘So I outrank you. Who are they? What do they want?’ Etan asked the dark.

‘Don’t you remember?’

Etan shook his head, then realised the man could not see. ‘Nothing. We were en route to Beta-Garmon II. It fell, we were diverted to Beta-Garmon III,’ he said as he pieced together the information from his foggy mind. ‘To join with other regiments from the home world.’

‘And the home world is?’

Etan screwed up his face. ‘Fasadia? Fasadia!’ he said. The name provoked a gush of memory, like he’d pulled a little stone from a dam and been rewarded with a stream of clear water.

‘Well done. You haven’t lost your mind,’ said Reming. Boots dragged on metal. The man was sitting up. ‘You’re not an officer. I’ve not called you “sir” once, and you haven’t mentioned it.’

‘Fair enough,’ said Etan Boq. ‘I’m a line gunner.’

‘That’s all?’

‘That’s all.’

‘Then you should call me sir!’ said Reming.

‘Sir,’ said Etan.

Suruq Reming’s tone changed. A vestige of authority returned to his voice. ‘Do you remember the attack?’

‘What attack?’

‘No, then.’ Reming scrambled forwards. Etan felt breath against his face. It was sour with dehydration. ‘They came quickly, took the transports unawares. They must have got into the atmospheric systems, because they gassed us all.’

‘That awful smell on my clothes?’

‘That awful smell. Now please be quiet. They only come when there’s noise. When you’re awake is when they take you away.’

‘Where?’

‘I don’t know. I don’t want to find out.’

Etan sat down and pulled his knees up to his chest. More was coming back to him. He remembered the alarm, and the sound of assault craft hitting the hull and locking on. He remembered being shouted out of his bunk, grabbing his lasgun and running, running towards…

A couple of other men were groaning. One began to shout in panic.

‘Oh no, oh no,’ said Reming. ‘Shut up!’ he hissed. ‘Shut up!’

His plea was quiet and desperate, and went unheeded. Booming footsteps rang outside the darkness, then stopped. A door unlocked and slid open.

Three Space Marines stood in the illumination of the space outside the hold. Etan Boq’s eyes were dazzled a moment, but recovered enough to let him see his surroundings. He saw a space far bigger than he had expected. There were men like Etan everywhere, crammed into a hold that stretched away into dimness well beyond the touch of the light. Some of the men were quite clearly dead.

He could not see what livery the Space Marines wore. All he could focus on were their glowing red eye lenses. He had a terrible fear of them. These were killers of men. Foolishly, he scrambled back, instantly drawing their attention.

‘That one,’ said the Space Marine. His voice was inhuman through his voxmitter. ‘That one, that one.’ He pointed with every word. He looked upon Etan. ‘And those two,’ he said, his finger held unwaveringly in Etan’s direction. ‘Begin waking the rest. These are the last of the test subjects. Magos Protos wants to begin full-scale processing as soon as his final calibrations are finished.’

The Space Marines stamped carelessly through their prisoners, breaking bones and crushing the hands of those still unconscious. One stopped by Etan, and reached out, down, down, his hand descending from such a great height, like a monster coming to steal him from his childhood bed. But the transhuman reached past Etan and grabbed a struggling man. It took a moment in his addled state to realise the man was Suruq Reming.

‘Now look what you’ve done!’ said Reming. ‘This is all your fault!’

Another Space Marine grabbed Etan Boq, and his troubles began in earnest.

The Space Marines hauled Etan, Reming and a score of others into the corridor. There they arranged them into pairs – Etan next to Reming – manacled their hands together and marched them off into parts of the *Warding* he had never been in before. The colours of their captors were clear now: sea green, marked with eyes of brass – the Sons of Horus themselves.

The legionaries were giants beyond Etan's ability to tolerate. They towered over him, their massive suits of growling armour amplifying the terror he felt. He had to run to keep up with their stride. When the captives slowed, the Space Marines responded with ungentle handling. Armoured, transhuman grips broke human limbs. Fear of bodily harm kept him moving as they headed down from the cargo hold. He had no idea which direction they were going in, or what part of the ship they had entered, but the air grew hotter, and echoing up the way came the sound of machinery, and screaming. He glanced at Reming. He was staring wide with terror, skin white, eyes bulging, his crotch dampened by his fear-loosened bladder.

'Don't look at me!' Reming said from the corner of his mouth. They were the last words the two ever exchanged, for shortly after they were herded into a chamber full of smoke and fire, and separated. Hundreds of improvised medical tables lined the room in neat ranks, tended to by terrified menials and blank-eyed servitors. The tables had been cut from iron plating and equipped with cargo straps refashioned as restraints. All save a handful at the centre of the room were unoccupied. It was from there that the screaming came, and it was to them that Etan and the others were inevitably taken.

The legionaries drove them with fists and curses into a circle of light surrounded by machines. Blood spotted the rusty floor. Despite the medical appearance of the equipment, it was filthy. Whatever horror awaited Etan, he did not expect to survive it.

A lone tech-adept in black robes oversaw procedures. Five men lay strapped to nearby tables, small devices fashioned from silvery metal clamped to their left temples. Servitors and frightened serfs stood over them. Four were either dead or unconscious; the other strained against his restraints, motionless and arch-backed as a fiddle bow, screaming endlessly.

'The last batch of test subjects,' said the legionaries' leader disdainfully. He clearly thought the duty beneath him. His two men shoved the prisoners into one line that curved around the circle.

The adept pulled back his hood, revealing a face of such advanced age that Etan was reminded of the caricatured marionettes from the theatres back home. He remembered the smell of the street outside. He remembered holding his father's hand.

'Hup hip! Here's old father time!' sang the story master, stalking around the small, round stage with his puppets dancing. 'Down, nown, the Aged King.'

Young Etan enjoyed the story, but the old puppets gave him night terrors. The

memory impinged upon him with such immediacy he forgot for a second where he was. When he blinked and returned to the awful present his limbs were weak as jelly. He feared he was going mad.

The adept who looked like the fears of his childhood rose up, and up, much taller than a man of his age and build should be. It was then Ethan saw he had no legs but long robes that swept down to the floor, tight around a circular bulge where his feet had once been, then loose past that to hang to the ground beneath.

'Oh well, the last, eh? Thank you so very much,' said the magos, with a spirit of such contrived geniality Etan was suddenly, totally terrified of him. The adept rose up higher until there was clear ground beneath the trailing hem of his habit and the deck. He floated along the line of twenty men, dipping down when he saw one that caught his eye, nodding and muttering as he appraised each, gripping faces and turning heads from side to side. He stopped before Etan, who could not avoid flinching as the magos sank down to admire him with eyes like black buttons.

'I think, I think, oh I cannot think!' the magos said. He held up his arm. The cloth fell back, revealing a silver augmetic hand. 'I think I cannot *think* with that racket! Please make it stop.'

One of his serfs bowed hastily, plucked up a surgical saw from a bench of similar instruments, and with great, deliberate, entirely unskilled care cut the screaming man's throat with four unsteady slices. The teeth on the saw rasped through flesh, gristle, then bone, each layer of tissue providing its own sickening sound. The man went slack in his restraints. His screams became gurgles became silence.

Blood sheeted onto the floor.

'You'll do first,' said the magos, and pointed at Etan.

Etan stared back, frozen.

'Yes, you, that's right. Come on.' The magos hovered up and away, his silver hand beckoning Etan to follow. 'Come on, don't be shy. I don't intend to hurt you. I'm not a monster. We only cut the throats of the ones that don't work, do you see?' he said, still affecting the tones of a friendly medicae. 'I'm sure you'll be fine.'

A pair of menials took Etan's trembling arms. He allowed them to lead him to a gurney. One of the serfs, only slightly less terrorised than he, gestured at the table. Etan sat on it.

'That's the spirit, better not to resist. It will hurt a lot less that way.' The magos chuckled. 'Lie down.' He fussed over a tray of devices like tiny silver kidneys

whose undersides sprouted wires finer than hair. In his fear-addled state, it took Etan a moment to recognise them as the devices embedded in the dead men's skin. The magos glanced over his shoulder.

'I said lie down, man! Come on now, we haven't got all day.'

Etan looked at the three Space Marines. Their eye lenses stared back at him with naked hostility. Hesitantly, Etan lay back. The magos gestured sharply to his serfs, and they strapped him into place tightly. 'I am magos Ardim Protos, a tech-priest of a most high rank. I am, or should I say I was, prime hermeticon of Sarum,' said the priest, 'before I found common cause with more enlightened practitioners of the ars technologica, and abandoned such stale titles. Now, do you understand why you are here?' He picked up one of the bean-sized devices from the tray and looked at Etan.

'No,' said Etan. The strap across his forehead crushed his head into the table. He struggled to see what the magos was doing.

'Sometimes I feel the same,' Protos chuckled. 'Go here, go there, do this, do that! Still, all done soon. You, my friend, should feel honoured. You are to fight for the Warmaster!'

'Yes, yes of course!' said Etan. 'Anything!' The words turned his stomach, but his fear was greater than his shame.

'Traitor!' hissed one of the other soldiers. A Space Marine cuffed him hard across the face. Bone broke, and he fell unconscious, dragging at the man chained to him. Reming whimpered.

'You might say that, but you would. I understand this is frightening for you. All this strange equipment and a magos of my rank about to perform who knows what terrible science upon you, eh? Eh?' He chuckled as if they were sharing a joke.

'You are of the Dark Mechanicum.'

'Dark, is it? Dark,' he chuckled again. He stared at the silver device and sighed. 'Dark is what our enemies call us. Ignorant is what we call them. New Mechanicum is the name we have for ourselves, and we are new, free of all those fussy little rules imposed on us by the Synod of Mars and the meddling Emperor of Terra. We have cast off tradition for the sake of enlightenment.' He spread his arms and looked upwards. 'Now you are going to join our quest for knowledge, become part of the great work! You are privileged, you know, I wasn't lying.'

Etan tensed as the magos brought his hideous young-old face close to Etan's. His breath was unpleasantly sugary, with a hint of rot, the halitosis of a man with a penchant for sweets. He brought the silver device close to Etan's head.

‘What is it?’ asked Etan.

‘I do respect a man who asks questions. It is good to be aware of everything, especially when it concerns oneself.’ He leaned closer. ‘It’s nothing very much, something of a side project of mine. In fact, I’ve done very little, if I am honest, beyond a few modifications. This is a skitarii interface system.’ He looked affectionately at the device. ‘We implant them in our cyborg warriors, you see. It enables them to access the Mechanicum infosphere, and that makes them far more responsive during battle than unmodified humans like you. But what is relevant here, for our purposes,’ he smiled again, exposing black teeth, ‘yours and my purposes, I mean, is that they allow us to control our warriors. Sadly, we’re running out of warriors. This war is taking far too long, and that rogue Rogal Dorn keeps sending more and more and more men to fight here. We’re short of reinforcements, and that gives us all a dilemma. We don’t have time to upgrade the likes of you, which we could, of course – then you would fight for us without a care, mostly because you wouldn’t be capable of caring. There’s no time for that, but we do have time to implant this little, tiny piece of technology. With this, a warrior loyal to the Emperor, and a meagre measure of time, we can create a soldier who will die for the cause. The *right* cause.’

He pressed metal against Etan’s temple. The wires tickled against his skin, and then they bit.

Etan gritted his teeth against the pain. The wires threaded past blood cells, nerves and muscle. Tiny needles scraped against bone.

‘I’ve modified them to modify you. Just an iota. An adjustment of loyalty, that is all.’

The wires squirmed, and plunged into the bone of Etan’s skull. The pain was sudden and intense. No man could have stifled his screams.

‘Yes, I’m sorry. The wiring has drilled into your skull. It will split now, and bridge neuronal gaps, make new connections. Soon, you’re not going to worry any more, and the pain will go away, I promise.’

Etan thrashed and howled. Ardim Protos stroked his forehead with a cold metal hand. ‘Shh,’ he said. ‘Shh. Not long, not long!’

Etan bucked. He was screaming so hard his sinews stood out in his neck and he could not breathe.

And then it was over. He fell limp. Blood trickled out of his nose.

‘It worked?’ he heard the Space Marine say.

‘Who do you follow?’ Protos asked Etan Boq.

‘The Warmaster,’ said Etan Boq. He was surprised at what he said, but his voice

was no longer his own. His actions were not his own.

Protos gestured to his minions. They undid Etan.

‘Stand,’ said Protos.

Etan stood. He could not stop himself; he was a prisoner in his own skull.

‘There,’ said Protos. ‘It worked. We are ready.’

Protos went to a bank of machines and turned a dial. Scores of servitors stepped out of the shadows and marched in pairs to the head of each table.

The Space Marine drew himself up, like he was shucking off the burden of boredom, and began to issue orders.

‘Bring them in, by the two hundred. We have fifty thousand men to process before we make landing!’ Human thralls scurried to obey. The Space Marine turned back to Protos. ‘These neuroslaves better serve our purpose.’

From the corner of his staring eyes, Etan saw Protos wince.

‘I wish you wouldn’t use that phrase,’ he said. ‘It is so… uncouth.’

SIXTEEN

To the South

The summons came in while *Domine Ex Venari, Velox Canis* and *Os Rubrum* were striding the sodium deserts west of the Jinsu ruins. The smoking remains dominated one horizon. In the other direction Hansu Hive reared high, its void shields sparkling against the attacks of the Warmaster's armies. The fierce battle engulfing the lower levels was out of sight below the horizon, but the hive was so huge its heights soared well clear of the planet's curve, and its vast, termite mound irregularity could be seen for hundreds of kilometres in every direction as a blued-out mass between the clouds.

Legio Defensor took the brunt of the attacks at Hansu, standing behind walls made from broken buildings, while the Imperial Hunters roved the Hanjin Wastes in lone maniples, on the hunt for enemy infiltration units threatening the rear of the Hansu enclave. Each to their own strengths, thought Esha. Hunting was theirs.

Giant metal feet kicked up clouds of pulverised salt and sand. The flats were subject to the whims of the planet's erratic weather. Every six years or so the sea surged up over the dunes separating the wastes from the ocean, flooding them with water that remained for years before it evaporated. In those times the wastes were sodium lakes, transforming slowly into desert crusted with valuable precipitates and wide deposits of evaporite. The changeable nature of the wastes discouraged construction, and they made for a natural border between Hansu and Jinsu.

In peacetime the Hanjin Wastes were empty but for tribes of chem-processors riding giant harvesters back and forth across the waste, ploughing up the surface before the next super tide inundated the plains.

Domine Ex Venari and its sisters were passing the blasted wreck of one such harvester when a priority signal punched into the maniple infosphere, its urgency-coding alone half-dragging Esha from meditative immersion in the manifold.

'Legio Solaria wide call. All princeps majoris respond. Hololithic conference to ensue in seven minutes.'

Esha Ani Mohana pulled herself a little further from *Domine Ex Venari*'s mind weave. Her soul separated into a discrete object and floated up out of the deep machine bond. She used the Titan's viewscreens to sweep the area for auspex contacts as she came back into the realm of flesh. The screens inset into the Reaver's czella showed there was nothing for hundreds of kilometres.

To use the hololithic communications table, Esha had to bring *Domine Ex Venari* to a stop and manoeuvre herself out of the czella into the small atrium above the reactor chamber of the Titan.

'All halt,' she voxed the maniple. 'I must communicate with the Great Mother. Standard defensive encirclement. Await my orders.'

She put *Domine* into a stand-by trance, trusting to the others on the crew to manage the Reaver while it was semi-dormant. She unclicked the neuro-tether from the back of her skull, wincing as the data spikes dragged out of the socket. Getting out of her chair and into the atrium without kicking her moderati in the back of the head always posed a challenge, even after years of practice. She was getting older, and her limbs were stiffer. After hours of bodily inactivity the door was more difficult to exit than it had been to enter by, but at least once out in the atrium she could stand, more or less.

Omega-6 had prepared the small chart table projector for her. When she entered, he bowed silently and withdrew downdecks. Esha sat herself in the atrium's sole chair, tugged off her glove and pressed her fingertip to the ident-plate.

The machine chimed. A host of small figures both seated and standing flickered into being over the desk's obsidian projection plate. Chart desks were holoprojectors of a mean sort, intended for graphical display rather than live feed of human subjects; consequently the great and good of the Legio were represented by poor light models, striated by bars of shadow and flickering at a frequency that encouraged eye strain. Few other lights shone in the atrium, a

couple of green-black screens and a number of status lights blinking to themselves. In the gloom, the hololiths were arctic bright, the glare further compromising their quality.

Esha looked across the assembled commanders. Among the Legio's personnel were two guests: Colonel Vannes of the Fasadian Heavy Infantry, and Guillame Ferré, third princeps majoris of the Legio Defensor. The images of the guests were more degraded by static than those of the Legio Solaria; weapons discharge and void shields interfered with their broadcasts from Hansu Hive. The discussion was already under way when Esha joined them, and the Great Mother interrupted Vannes in order to welcome her.

'Esha Ani Mohana. Daughter,' said the Great Mother, who alone was not represented by a figure, but spoke as a disembodied voice. '*Jehani Jehan has discovered the fate of Legio Defensor's missing scout.'*

'A great deal of good it did us,' complained Vannes.

'What happened?'

'They're all dead,' said Jehani's light image, her eyes looking past Esha's face. *'Titan, crew and tech-priest. What killed them was not apparent. It is possible it was other engines, though I read none on* Cursor Ferro*'s sensorium. I can say that it was powerful. The Rapier exhibited the signs of a quick death.'*

'Orbital strike?' suggested Osha Mir, princeps majoris of Eleventh/Thirteenth Maniple.

'It is possible,' said Jehani Jehan. *'Whatever it was, we can assume our southern flank is at risk.'*

'There is no indication of overflight by traitor forces in that sector,' said Vannes.

'Their fleet is far too busy pounding our positions here for that,' said Ferré sardonically.

'They could have struck from Beta-Garmon Two, a missile maybe, servitor-guided,' said Durana Fahl, whose Titan *Steel Huntress* was patrolling the far southern limits of the Hanjin Waste with *Procul Videns* in support.

'Unlikely,' said Esha.

'Yes, but possible,' insisted Fahl.

'However it occurred, it has occurred,' said Ferré. *'I am saddened to learn of yet more brave comrades lost to this war.'*

'Death happens to us all,' said Vannes. *'It can strike without warning. We may never know what happened.'* To save on transmission bandwidth, the audio cut in only when one of them spoke. Whenever the colonel opened his mouth, the

distant scream of plummeting shells accompanied his words over the voxwaves.

'It does, but not always like this,' said Ferré. *'This is happening too often.'*

'What do you mean?' asked Esha.

'Princeps Seniores Ferré has lost contact with all of his patrols,' said the Great Mother.

'I see,' said Esha.

'The enemy are becoming better organised. Their attacks are more focused, harder to anticipate,' said Ferré. *'Our engines are suffering. I see the hand of the Warmaster here.'*

'Our esteemed ally speaks the truth,' said Vannes. *'An Iron Warriors siege battalion is establishing an engineering camp outside the range of the lighter hive guns. We've got the heavier artillery zeroed in on them, but they're void protected. I fought those scum before. It won't be long before they return fire on all positions targeting them, whether on the ground or in orbit. They won't stop until the counterbatteries are silent. After that, the real trouble begins.'*

'That's an unwelcome development,' said Fahl.

'Unwelcome? You underestimate the gravity of what I said,' said Vannes. *'I had not heard of Ferré's problems until yesterday. This felling of Defensor's patrols is worrying. When the Iron Warriors are ready and move in, I'm nearly as sure as a man can be that we'll see the opening of a second front to the south. It's effective, if predictable.'*

'They don't need to be too clever,' said Ferré. *'They have the numbers, and the upper hand. Without better coordination, Beta-Garmon Three will go the same way as Beta-Garmon Two.'*

'If you allow me to pull in some of my engines from search and destroy missions,' said Esha, 'I can offer Third and Second Maniples to form a picket line against the remains of Jinsu.'

'You will have more,' said the Great Mother. *'Seven maniples, under your command. All prior orders are rescinded – you are assigned this demio-Legio as of now. You will muster in force and prepare to thwart any attack from the south.'*

'If it doesn't come?'

'Then we shall resume our prior role.'

'It will come,' said Vannes. *'But you will not fight alone. The environment out there is not the gentlest, but a solid man can brave it out. This morning I requested reinforcements from Lord General Bollivar. I received a coded communique shortly after. There's a Fasadian regiment inbound from system's*

edge. It has been diverted to the wastes. I have received confirmation of their arrival. They will aid you in holding the ground.'

'What about our own support troops?' asked Esha.

'*Our skitarii and secutarii are fully occupied here, with Legio command,'* said the Great Mother. *'The reinforcements Lord General Bollivar promises will provide adequate ground support. I have already despatched Baron Hanto and fourteen lances of Knights to your aide. He will arrive at the rendezvous tomorrow.'*

'Leave the smaller dangers to us, princeps seniores,' said Vannes. '*We need you sharp to clear away enemy armour and god-machines, should they manage to land any, Emperor forbid. Hansu can repel an infantry assault of any size, but if Titans come against the south, the situation will spiral out of our control.'*

'Rally your engines quickly, huntress,' urged Ferré. *'If our long-range patrols were slain for a purpose, it is to keep their plans secret. The enemy will be quick to exploit the opening. They will not announce themselves.'*

'One might say they have,' said Esha. 'What if we are acting as they desire? What if the destruction of the patrols is a goad?'

'You point, princeps majoris?' said Vannes.

'It might be a ruse to draw us away. A trap, even.'

'It may be, but you must hold the south,' said Vannes. *'You will have forty-five god-engines at your command. With my countrymen at your side, you should be able to resist even if this is a ploy. I do not see what other choice we have. We must respond.'*

'Great Mother?' asked Esha.

'Their commands are my commands, princeps seniores. Legio first, my daughter.'

'Legio first, Great Mother,' said Esha.

The hololiths contracted to points of light with a dying whistle.

Esha stayed in the dark a while. She took off her other glove and rubbed the heels of her hands into her eyes. She was tired beyond the point of exhaustion. Not even the strength of *Domine Ex Venari* could keep it wholly from her. When in the manifold the machine's strength kept her going, but disconnected as she was now, fatigue hit her like a falling building. Her eyes closed. Disconnected images filled the theatre of her mind. Old fights, old friends, regretted situations tormented her; they played out differently in ways that could never change anything.

She jolted, fearing she had fallen asleep. She fetched herself a plastek bladder

of water from a storage unit and drank most of it down. The rest she poured into her hands and rubbed into her face and those bits of her neck she could reach. The skin around her spinal port was sore.

She took a deep breath, wiped her hands on her trousers, and put her gloves back on.

The door opened on the cramped czella. Worn out as she was, it seemed crazy to grant the cockpit so holy a name. It felt like a deathtrap.

Wearily, she slid herself back into the command throne and plugged in. *Domine Ex Venari*'s tireless might washed out some of her exhaustion.

'What orders, my princeps?' asked Yeha Yeha from her position at Esha's feet.

'Legio Solaria walks, moderati. All speed south.'

SEVENTEEN

A Moment's Respite

The demi-Legio gathered in the shadow of Jinsu Hive's broken mountain. The hive's death had scattered debris for miles around, turning that part of the Hanjin Wastes into a junkyard landscape, riven with crevasses and sinkholes where subterranean levels had caved in. The weather on Beta-Garmon III was almost always dangerous, but a rare clear evening revealed the sky. The atmosphere's thinness allowed the dark of space to show even while the sun still shone, a blue as deep as a failing void shield. In the harsh light of Beta-Garmon the devastation of Jinsu looked worse, incomprehensibly vast, a human anthill kicked in by a callous god.

The fires burning in Jinsu's remains would not go out for decades. Smudgy tracks of dark brown straggled skywards over the jagged peaks of the ruins. To the south-west the diamond necklace of the Chymist's Sea garlanded the horizon, white waves rushing upwards around cliffs of broken plasteel.

The demi-Legio scouted for some time to find a site suitable for the landing of the void ships. A little to the north there was plenty of space, but no cover from the elements or the enemy. Further south the enemy would first have to pass through the debris fields, and there in the maze of chasms and steel, Esha decided, their attack would be easier to break up and halt.

Once a suitable site had been discovered, the Legio stopped its pacing and waited for their reinforcements, tensely hoping the Fasadians would arrive before their enemies. As the sun rode the sky twice and neither friends nor foe

came, Esha ordered the crews to sleep in rota, no more than four hours each, while others watched over them. In the meantime, Baravi Hanto and the bond-Knights of Procon Vi joined their mistresses, and something approaching a strong force began to take shape.

Esha found it hard to rest. She constantly refreshed the comms log, looking for the arrival of the Fasadian reinforcement regiment. There were worrying gaps in their capabilities. A high proportion of the fights in the cluster were pure engine on engine affairs. The Garmonite worlds had suffered from long occupation by mankind, and their environments were often too harsh for lesser troops and machines. Her demi-Legio was well equipped to deal with that kind of battle, but despite its deadly weather Beta-Garmon III allowed all manner of warriors to fight, and a Legio without infantry support was vulnerable to certain forms of attack. Sometimes, infantry needed to be opposed by infantry.

The sun went down. Wind blew salt-laden dust across the Titans standing in the dark. Their banners snapped. Esha's need to sleep would not be denied any longer. There was enough force in the breeze to rock the giant machines on their legs. The czella cockpit swayed. *Domine Ex Venari*'s soul was a vast, comforting presence, a guardian beast who would watch over Esha and protect her without question. The command throne was warm. Her head nodded.

Together, Titan and princeps slept, and Esha's dreams that night were the strange visions of machines.

There was no pain like childbirth. The few women in the Legio who had undergone its ordeal came to her one by one while Esha was confined in her rooms awaiting the day. Towards the end she found it hard to get out of the door of her mean little quarters, and certainly could not command *Bestia Est*. The women arrived shyly, bearing her small gifts, and then they warned her, telling of the blood, tears and bodily indignities with grim little smiles. They seemed to relish sharing, but not to torment, she realised almost straightaway. These women had a look to them no others did. Their faces shone when they spoke of their daughters' achievements. She was surprised to hear that the few who had had boys kept themselves informed about their sons' progress through the priesthood.

After the third of them came to visit her she knew for sure they were not attempting to frighten her, but were instead welcoming her into their sisterhood within a sisterhood. They were mothers, the role evolution had forced upon the female sex, and yet so few got to experience it in the Legio. She had never

thought about it much, but it seemed sacred now she approached her own labour, and certain of the legends of Pahkmetris made more sense to her.

The magos medicae who tended to the physical wellbeing of the Legio crews dispassionately laid out the procedures to be used. The gruesomeness of his descriptions was worsened by the detached tone of his voxmitter. There would be pain. Ruptures. Potential organ damage. Parts of her that she would rather a knife never come near might need to be cut to facilitate the birth. She could even die.

'I apologise for these inconveniences,' said the magos, as dully as if the lumens in her quarters were inactive and he had no time to spare to fix them. 'The human brain is among the greatest accomplishments of the Machine-God, a device given us so that we might improve upon it for his satisfaction and our enlightenment. But in order for us to comprehend the workings of the universe, our cognitive centre has to be large. This makes childbirth dangerous for human females. It always has been, and is still.'

'Right,' Esha said. 'All hail the Machine-God in his wisdom.' Worry made her more than a little blasphemous. The magos was too far past humanity to hear the irony in her voice, but carried on his relentless explanation.

'It all serves a purpose, of course. It is a rite of passage. The pain will activate certain chemical processes within you that will bond you and make rearing the infant easier.'

'I will love it,' she said, 'because it will hurt me?' It sounded ridiculous. His explanation probably was, but she would love it, she knew. She felt it as surely as a star warms its planets and brings forth life from the sea. The Machine-God decreed it to be so.

'A crude and imprecise way of encapsulating the marvels of neurochemistry,' said the magos aloofly, 'but if you prefer, then yes, you will.' Before he left, while he was packing away his instruments back into the slots in his torso, he said, 'If you wanted to be a mother, I really do not understand why you did not petition for cloning. Your combat record is exemplary. The Legio would have gladly acquiesced.'

Esha's hand strayed to her swollen stomach protectively. 'It just happened.'

'Nothing ever just happens, Esha. The Machina Cosma does not work that way.'

This short conversation did not help much, and neither the other mothers nor the magos prepared her adequately for what actually occurred.

She never knew such pain. It was like no insult ever done to her body before,

going beyond even the sympathetic agonies she experienced when her engine took a direct hit. All sense of deference to her superiors and those others who attended her was forgotten.

She swore a lot and cursed them all.

But when it was over, and she held the snuffling infant in her arms, she knew for a fact the magos was correct about something. She did love her child. Unconditionally.

She nuzzled the small damp head, enchanted by the smell, part her, part the baby's father, but together a unique scent all of its own, as every human being is unique. Esha believed in the Machine-God absolutely, and was awed by his miracles, but never had she seen anything as miraculous as that child. They called the place she recovered in a convalescence chamber! As if there was something wrong, as if she had been ill.

Men had named the place. Men were blind.

But so were some women.

Jehani Jehan was late to come and visit her in the medicae facility. So late, Esha thought she would not come.

The day was over, the sun had just gone down, but there were windows high up in the room wall that were still rectangles of orange. Rhomboids slanted from them high onto the opposite wall. They were golden, warm. Jehani was by contrast cold. Her eyes glinted darkly in the shadows by the door. Esha smiled to see her friend, but something about Jehani's manner put her on her guard. She hugged her child close. Instinct warned her. She was suddenly afraid of her friend.

'It's all finished then?' said Jehani Jehan.

'Here she is,' Esha moved around in her bed to show off her precious bundle, but kept her close. She did not offer the infant up to be held, as she had done for all the other women who had visited. 'She is to be called Abhani Lus Mohana.' She looked down at Abhani proudly. 'Granddaughter of the Great Mother herself.'

Jehani stayed by the door.

'You can't mean to keep her.' Jehani's attitude was hostile.

'Why not?' said Esha. 'There was no gene-contract made between me and her father. There is no bargain to be honoured. She is a happy accident, and therefore she is a scion of Procon Vi and Legio Solaria alone.'

'Is that so?' said Jehani.

'Why are you being this way?' said Esha.

Her friend moved closer, and peered down at the sleeping child.

'She's the bastard of bastards,' said Jehani coldly. She gestured at the curl of red hair on the baby's crown, the pale skin. 'She even looks like one of them. She's not one of us.'

Esha was hot, and tired, her skin stretched with fluids and emotion. Her abdomen was slack, the muscles weakened, and her groin was a mess of stitching and fading pain. But in that moment she would have fought Jehani to the death if she threatened the child, and she would have won.

Jehani Jehan made no move, but stared with hatred at her child.

'The Imperium of Man is not concerned with the appearance of its citizens, the Mechanicum even less so, Jehani. Why aren't you happy for me? She is one of us.'

'Is she? I watched her father burn fifty thousand innocent people for a point that did not need to be made.'

'She is not her father.'

A little passion entered Jehani. 'How do you know she will not grow to be like him? Evil like that is carried in the genes, my sister. Dispose of it. It is the right thing to do.' She looked at Abhani like she was a thing.

'I will do nothing to *her*,' she said.

Jehani stood suddenly, and backed away in a display of shame and anger.

'Then you have gained a daughter but lost a sister. I hope you think the price right.' With those words she left, leaving their friendship discarded behind her.

'One day, you will fight alongside this girl, and you will see that you were wrong, Jehani Jehan,' Esha called after.

But her friend was gone out into the dark corridor.

Esha felt a stab of pain. It could not diminish how she felt for her daughter. There was no love like it.

Jehani Jehan simply could not compete.

EIGHTEEN

Neuro-slaves

Morning brought new light and new hope. A human hand rocked Esha's shoulder. In her dream she had left behind womanly form and become at one with her god-engine. The sensation of human fingers big enough to clasp an engine's shoulder was a striking incongruity that had her come to wakefulness with a gasp.

Domine Ex Venari jerked with her rousing.

Yeha Yeha looked about, alarmed. *Domine Ex Venari* settled as Esha woke fully.

'Incoming contacts, my princeps,' Yeha Yeha said, speaking formally now they were unlinked. 'Landing craft. They broadcast friendly identification signals. The Fasadians are here.'

Esha nodded her thanks and sat forward. The input jack dragged at her neck. Her mouth was foul and eyes sore. With shaking hands she unplugged herself and stood. The moderati seats were empty.

'Where are the crew?' she asked.

'Resting, as you commanded.'

Esha nodded again. Yeha Yeha smiled at her. 'This is a rough hunt. I brought you this.' She handed Esha a steaming mug of sustenance broth. Esha sipped it gratefully. It tasted only marginally better than her mouth, but it warmed her. Stimulants lacing the broth stabilised her mind, and the tremors in her hands subsided.

‘Let’s go and see,’ she said.

They passed into the atrium behind the head. Mephani Ohana and Jephenir Jehan were curled up into one another on the floor. From the left gunnery control sounded the loud snoring of Fenina Bol.

‘Wake them,’ Esha told Yeha Yeha. The moderati primus set to the task with her customary gusto. Esha pulled up a cartolith onto the chart desk. Wireframes of the Legio decorated the plain black surface, the large Titans motionless. Flickering data tags described their activity status. Half were inactive, as she had ordered.

She pulled the view back. The Titans shrank until they would all fit in the palm of her hand. Tiny Warhounds stalked a wide perimeter. The limits of the fallen hive rose at the edge of the display, poorly represented by crudely stacked triangles. The sea was a mess of tiny geometric shapes that rose and fell. The tide had come in a long way in the night, inundating more of the hive ruins, and was now only a few miles from the Legio’s position.

At her command the view went further, the Titans dwindling to points of light that merged, until she had a high view that took in all the collapsed hive and the lower orbits. A fleet converged there, its escorts forming a loose screen around landing craft. A small force had broken away from the blockade bombarding Hansu Hive and was moving to intercept.

Behind her, the moderati were grumbling at being awoken. Yeha Yeha handed out more of the awful ration drink.

‘That’s not my mug,’ Ohana moaned. ‘That’s Jephenir’s.’

‘It’s the Legio’s mug,’ Yeha Yeha responded.

‘But it’s not *my* Legio mug,’ Ohana said.

Esha leaned in. She set her breakfast down on the desk. Part of the mug intruded onto the projection surface, upsetting the image.

‘This doesn’t look right,’ she said.

‘Princeps?’ said Yeha Yeha.

‘Look,’ she pointed at the arrowhead of ships coming in to attack the Fasadian reinforcements. ‘Does that look right to you?’

Yeha Yeha’s warm body pushed against hers as she bent down to scrutinise the cartolith.

‘It’s a small attack – maybe they can’t spare the ships from the Hansu blockade?’

‘They’re coming in at the wrong vector.’

Yeha Yeha shrugged. ‘I’m not a void specialist.’

‘Void war is not dissimilar to engine combat – you merely have to project it into three dimensions.’

‘Easy for you to say, my princeps,’ said Yeha Yeha. ‘You score far higher than me. That’s why you’re princeps and I’m a primus.’

‘Look at it,’ said Esha. ‘If you were going to attack a concentration of enemy engines with an inferior force, would you come in from that direction?’

‘No. It’d be suicide,’ said Yeha Yeha.

‘It’s the same with this. There aren’t enough ships. But what if you did not want to commit suicide? What if you had another aim with this manoeuvre? What would that aim be?’

Yeha Yeha frowned. ‘I’d come in at that position if I weren’t concerned with the obvious target but were aiming for something else.’ Yeha’s eyes moved across the display, coming to rest upon the agglomerated dots that represented the Legio.

‘Like us,’ Esha got up in a hurry. ‘Everyone, back to your stations.’

‘But I haven’t even used the ablutorial yet!’ Ohana said.

‘Back, now!’ Esha pulled a vox horn from the wall. ‘All Titans, engage reactors. Prepare for immediate attack!’ She didn’t wait for the confused replies to come through, but ran for the hatch to downdecks, shoving past her moderati as they raced for their seats. She yanked open the trapdoor, taking the furnace blast of the reactor full in the face. ‘Omega-6, reactor to full power immediately!’ she hollered. She slammed the hatch closed on his protests and went into the czella.

Domine Ex Venari’s reactor came online roughly, surges of badly moderated power causing instrument lumens to flare all around the cockpit. The moderati were shouting their way through their cross checks, the prayers of activation given barest acknowledgement. The snap of flicking switches rattled around the czella like dice in a cup. Esha rammed her feet into the emergency command stirrups, fumbling her restraint harness closed.

‘Esha, what is happening, is the attack coming?’ Durana Fahl voxed. *‘I have nothing on my scopes besides the Fasadians.’*

‘The Fasadians are the attack!’ she shouted. She pushed the MIU interface spike home, her jaw clenching against the pain in her spinal column.

Domine Ex Venari woke badly. Its soul unfurled from hidden logic engines in uncoordinated spasms. Its arms twitched. Unbidden, the Reaver took a step forward.

‘Damn it! Damn it!’ Esha swore. The descent into unity was a series of

precipitate drops rather than a smooth submersion. Her moderati were presences struggling for contact, the tendrils of their outreached souls reaching and failing to catch her.

She was still fighting *Domine Ex Venari* when the first lance strikes slammed out of the heavens, and obliterated *Odercarium*.

'Warlords, return fire!' she shouted into the vox. 'The rest of you, move!' Shells were screaming down from upper orbit, blasting craters into the wastes, sending hundred-metre-high spouts of water up from the ocean, and carving new holes into the carcass of Jinsu Hive.

Odercarium was a burning wreck. Half the Titans were in the same situation as *Domine Ex Venari*, their princeps battling through emergency activation to bring them to full operation. The Titans on watch were already running and therefore quicker to react; their void shields were going up. The twelve Warlords Esha had under her command were tilting upwards and firing, pacing back to find better lines of fire to their assailants. Light flashed high up somewhere beyond the atmosphere as their laser blasters and volcano cannons found one of the attacking ships.

A shell exploded on *Virtue of War*'s carapace, sending the Reaver reeling.

'Get your void shields up!' she shouted, though her own were still inactive. 'Theatre command, this is Esha Ani Mohana. Redirect defence laser fire to low void zone, my sector. We are under orbital attack. The Fasadians have turned!'

She struggled to maintain her plea for aid and fight her Titan's soul into submission.

'Mephani, continue trying to raise them!' Esha shouted. She screamed at feedback pain and hit the armrest of her throne. 'Damn it, *Domine*!'

'There is a wide cast denial broadcast emanating from both fleets. I am getting no response,' Mephani Ohana said.

'We'll have to wait for command to notice. Concentrate on getting the shields up!' Esha gasped. Her rest the night before had lessened her fatigue only minimally. The struggle with her engine quickly drained what small reserve of strength she had.

Domine Ex Venari, they are coming for us. Awake! She thought. She shut her eyes, closing out the shouts of her princeps and moderati by force of will. She saw again the molten soul of her engine, the being she parasitised, a swirling vortex of alloyed science and power.

Fight! she shouted at it. Fight!

The erratic noise of the reactor smoothed out. *Domine Ex Venari* peered into her

being with a dumb animal's mix of love and hate.

They joined.

Esha's mind blended with the roaring heart of the Titan. Her senses expanded. Her reality shifted. She felt the raising of the void shields as three, distinct shudders across her back. The Titan moved out of time with her thoughts, disorienting her, but they rapidly synchronised. Her moderati's minds touched the machine, and through it hers.

Domine Ex Venari was active.

'Power all weapons!' she ordered. 'Demi-Legio split, maniple by maniple. Weapons free. Choose targets of opportunity. Keep moving.'

Her maniple came to her and she stepped out, moving forwards just in time. A column of light slammed into the ground where the Titan had been standing, evaporating salt and vitrifying sand. The sky blossomed with a string of explosions. A larger detonation erupted in the middle. The bombardment eased. Lines of fire arced down from a destroyed voidship. Her Warlords had struck back, but falling wreckage would soon add to their woes.

The shapes of drop-ships were growing in the sky, pale white as daytime moons. Rains of laser fire blasted down from their undersides to clear landing zones of hostiles. While the bombardment was ongoing, the drop-ships were left free as the Titans tilted backwards, straining their mechanisms to target the warships firing upon them. The combined fire output of a demi-Legio was considerable, and a genuine threat to void craft in orbit. Another voidship was hit multiple times and removed itself from the battle. It headed off, the gases pouring from its wounded sides clearly visible from the ground. Esha could not tell if it was dying or retreating under control. It didn't matter. It was gone over the horizon and no longer her problem.

She allowed her weapons moderati to fire the guns without her direction. It was a strange sensation, like having someone else move her hands for her, but she ignored it. She had to concentrate on the tactical situation.

The warships attacking them were small, destroyers, a couple of cruisers. Their purpose was to distract her Titans from the drop-ships. But both were threats.

Come on, Vannes, she thought to herself. See what's happening here. Fire on the enemy!

The drop-ships were spreading their formation. Rather than using the landing zone designated by the Legio Solaria, most were coming down in a wide ring, aiming to encircle the demi-Legio and destroy it. To scatter the engines, several ships were making a perilous run to the centre of their encampment. The Legio

was in danger of being trapped.

Esha saw that they had been tricked. As she had suggested, the wrecked scout had been bait; they were supposed to see the attack coming. Esha could not let their plans succeed in the destruction of yet another loyal Titan Legio, opening the way to Hansu Hive's vulnerable southern flank.

'They are attempting to surround us. Maniples spread. Scatter. Unto the hunt!'

Domine Ex Venari's war horns blared.Its sisters answered, their hooting songs defying the enemy's attempts to destroy them.

The air vibrated with the descent of the drop-ships stirring vertical winds in the atmosphere. The pulsing of their grav motors bounced the ground like a drum skin. Gravel danced across the hardpan. The drop-ships went from pale grey to dark cream marred by metallic patches, their livery eroded by exposure to the void.

An enormous troop drop-ship with a disembarkation port fifty metres across and an angular flight deck elevated high over it neared the ground. Void shields flared as the Legio's scattering Titans blasted at it. Stray shots pierced the aegis, adding black scarring to the craters pocking the hull. Fires took in the sides, but it flew undaunted. Enormous landing claws reached for the hardpan, splaying fingers as large as marshalling yards. They grasped the earth, claiming it for their own. Clustered pistons as thick through as a Warhound took the ship's immense weight.

More ships were coming in spiralling descents behind it, like scavenger birds riding thermals down to a carcass. The Titans built up to full speed, scattering before the onslaught, never still, but their movement gave only a small degree of protection from weapons designed for the high-speed intensity of void war. A running Warhound took seven successive cannon hits, the first two ripping out its shielding, each impact driving it into the ground like a hammer hitting a nail. It lumbered on, knees bent, one arm coming loose, but the assault did not let up, and it crashed down. Broken components scattered from its flaming wreckage.

The first ship was on the ground. Its primary ramp descended, a wide, broad mouth full of warriors bearing lasguns. Thousands of men charged out into the conflict. The Titans attacked as they emerged, finally bringing the drop-ship's shields down. A wall of fire leapt up from Warhound inferno cannons, immolating hundreds of the soldiers. The enemy ran on without fear, hurling themselves into the fire in their attempts to get to their foe. Lances of Knights ran into them, culling them by the dozen. Blades of las-fire burst from the ground; thousands of beams of light rebounded off the Knights' ion shields.

There were too many to be resisted. The first Knight went down a moment later to a raging storm of man-portable heavy weapons fire.

'Tenth, Sixth, Ninth and Fourth Maniples concentrate fire on the second incoming drop-ship,' Esha voxed. 'Warhound packs form from Second and Ninth Maniples, broad sweep. Herd the infantry into the arms of House Procon Vi. We must clear this area and break out!'

Two more drop-ships were nearing the ground. While the central ships disgorged their warriors, the others continued to head to positions that would put them out of the immediate attentions of the Legio Solaria, where they could form a perimeter. From there they would tighten the noose, move in and annihilate the Legio.

'More sacrifices,' Abhani Lus said. Her voice had a feral edge to it as her personality was subsumed by the spirit of her engine.

'The Warmaster spends the lives of his men freely. This reckless disregard for humanity is what we are fighting against,' Durana Fahl added.

Their voices were stuttered by power spiking as their weapons drew on their reactors to fuel the play of destruction.

The second drop-ship settled into the earth and began opening its holds. Under the patina of carbon and accreted dust the vile symbols of wicked gods were painted. They were fighting against more than recklessness, thought Esha; they were fighting madness itself. She despatched half the Knights and a single Warlord to attack the enemy as they emerged.

Three maniples moved to intercept the third drop-ship. Its minimal laser batteries were inadequate to the task of breaking the Titans' void shields. Its aegis weakened, allowing more strikes against the armoured hull, then gave out with a bang that sent a wave-front of displaced air rushing outwards in all directions. The noise heralded the ship's demise. The Titans switched to their most powerful weapons, shunting power to their volcano cannons and unleashing a web of thick, white-hot beams of light. They tore into the craft, punched through multiple layers of armour and burst from the other side. Something volatile caught in the giant ship's hold. Plates blasted from the sides as it exploded. The back broke, and the ship dropped the final hundred metres to the ground, spilling burning men from its interior.

The Titans turned as it fell, building up to running speed, the princeps knowing full well what was to come.

The drop-ship hit the ground. Its fusion reactor slipped its bonds. A hemisphere of light scoured the craft from existence, the shockwave blasting men from their

feet, shattering plasteel. Many soldiers did not rise, their organs pulverised by overpressure. The expanding wave-front slammed into another drop-ship, sending it wallowing in the air as its grav impellers broke open. Raining sparks, it slid sideways towards the ground, crash-landing gracelessly.

Domine Ex Venari stalked a desert transformed into a garden of fire. Esha scoured the field for targets while keeping a portion of her mind fixed upon the wider situation. Chunks of debris fell from the heavens, roaring with heat. Burning liquid rained through skies crossed with smoke trails. She almost missed the whip-sharp cracks of artificial thunder generated by defence laser fire.

Hansu Hive had finally seen the ploy, and was firing upon the subfleet bombarding Legio Solaria. She hoped this aid did not cost the defence of Hansu Hive too dearly.

Still the bombs fell. Still lances punched from low orbit, branding the ground like lit lho-sticks pressed into skin. By luck rather than Esha's skill, *Domine Ex Venari* was not hit, but other Titans were not so fortunate. In the czella, passionless machine voices announced the names of slain god-engines. Esha and *Domine Ex Venari* mourned them in tandem.

The initial landing at the central point was nearing an end. The fifth and final drop-ship was coming down, more or less unmolested now the Legio was committed to destroying the troops who had already touched down. The area Esha had chosen for the landing zone was a blazing tangle of wreckage. The Fasadians were hardy, well armoured and well equipped, but they were horrendously outmatched. They had brought in no mobile armour or larger fighting machines to the makeshift landing field. Esha nervously checked over the ring of drop-ships setting down about the Legio. If she were to make a wager, she'd bet all she had on there being significant armour contingents in the surrounding force. Tanks were rarely much of a problem for a god-engine, a few specialist Titan-hunter classes aside, unless deployed in significant numbers. The ships could carry enough.

Domine Ex Venari kicked its way through a hillock of burning metal. Its guns blasted at the tiny figures running all over the desert.

The Legio Solaria rallied quickly, turning their heavier guns on the surrounding drop-ships and raking the field with high calibre fire. The Warhounds came into their own at the central landing zone, chasing down whole formations of troops and cutting them to pieces with vulcan megabolters, hails of mass reactives leaving semi-circular ditches full of blood carved into the desert floor. But this

was not the real fight, she reminded herself. That was to come. Esha turned her head, and *Domine Ex Venari* turned its head with her. Through mechanical eyes they looked out towards the sea.

The sea was the key.

'Legio, cease hunt. Converge on my mark.'

'We're breaking through?' Esha didn't catch who spoke. Her MIU data feed was overburdened with detail. Gallia, maybe, one of the princeps in Sixth Maniple.

'We are. All engines converge on this point.' Upon the demi-Legio's cartolith, she indicated the drop-ship nearest the shore, and took stock of her remaining forces. Ten engines down. Over thirty left. More than enough. They had been caught by surprise, but that moment was over.

'We get through there, we'll be caught between their guns and the ocean,' said Jehani Jehan, dissenting as usual.

'Our alternative is to be surrounded on all sides. The ocean will be our guard. Third, Sixth and Ninth Maniples, range on formation right. Prepare to turn back, come around and…

'*…we surround them, and drive them into the sea.'*

'You almost sound like you approve, Jehani,' she said grimly.

'Legio first,' said Jehani.

'Legio first. Unto the hunt.'

Three dozen Titans sounded their wrath. Time to turn the battle.

Moving to maximum speed, the Titans converged. Hanto rallied his banners and bade the swift Knights come into an arc before the god-engines. The entirety of Procon House Vi's bond-Knights were present on the field, filling Baravi Hanto's heart with well-deserved pride. They ran ahead of the Titans, picking up speed, heavy stubbers and battle cannons felling the traitors wherever they were found. The Knights swayed as they ran, swaggering brawlers fixed on mayhem. They sprinted through slicks of burning fuel, and past piles of wreckage. Thick bands of smoke rolled across the cracked plains, hugging the ground. Salt and grit pattered on *Falcon*'s leg plating. The battlefield was awhirl with competing air currents, ocean wind, gusts of fire and overpressure blasts, mixing ash, smoke, salt and sand into a concealing screen.

Leading from the front, the baron was first out of the brume, bursting into bright sunlight. Seven drop-ships squatted on the horizon behind veils of heat shimmer. Smaller shapes clustered around their bases. The range finders in his

warsuit's sensorium ticked down the metres as he ran, five thousand and closing. There was no cover, just dead flat, heat-cracked salt plane all the way to the ships. Feeble dunes banked behind them, not high enough to hide the twinkle of the ocean. His Knights came quickly behind him, reforming into a mighty chevron nearly a kilometre across. Fallen in, they jogged in formation towards their foe.

At two thousand nine hundred metres, the enemy opened fire. The line of black shapes flashed with muzzle discharge. Hundreds of tanks awaited the Knights.

'Ion shields front!' Baron Baravi Hanto bellowed. The air shifted around the line as every energy field was rotated to cover the front aspect of the Knights. Ordinarily invisible, the fine salts in the air revealed the fields, disrupting the passage of daylight and hazing the Knights behind a wave-front of sparkling energy.

'Charge!' he screamed. His Knights and their warsuits answered him with the lowing battle hymns of their war horns.

It was a charge from out of history's dim past, when Knights had ridden horses and their warsuits were simple armours of metal. Nigh on a hundred Questoris-pattern Knights of all types thundered towards the enemy line. Their feet pounded up a shawl of fine sand that trailed behind the Knightly line. Las-beams blew molten trails through the dust. Shells screamed through the air on supersonic, flat trajectories. Ion shields flared as they took the hits. Their technology was different to that of the void shields carried by the Titans, more primitive but less temperamental, casting an adaptable screen of highly energised ions in a single direction that was solid enough to steal the momentum from projectiles or turn them aside completely. Tank shells caromed from the shields or slowed to a halt and fell to the ground. Las-fire flattened across the barriers and winked out. The space before the Knights' charge became a churning storm of fire and shrapnel. Not every blast was stopped; not every one could be. Shots got through. Shrapnel pinged off *Falcon*'s armour. Las-beams struck, some still possessing enough power to scorch its paint.

A Knight exploded a score of metres along the line. It was running one moment, the next it was a column of smoke and debris spreading fingers outwards. A leg crashed down in front of Hanto. The baron increased his speed, sending *Falcon* into a bone-jarring leap over the tumbling wreckage.

'Legio first!' he screamed. 'Open fire!'

Battlecannons held forward like lances belched smoke and flame. Sliding barrels recoiled into their sleeving, pumped forward again by trapped gases,

preparing the guns for the next round that slammed into the breech. Missile pods spat flocks of death towards the foe. Cones of debris blasted skywards along the enemy line. Men and machines were lofted up almost playfully, as if all were involved in a game to see who could leap the highest.

Hanto could see the tanks clearly now, geometrical shapes tall in the sand, infantry ranged between them. Squads of heavy-weapons troopers unleashed their fury. The drop-ships fired with their anti-personnel weapons. Ion shields sparkled and roared with explosions. The Knights fired back. More of Hanto's retainers went crashing down, reactors giving out with ferocious explosions.

The Knights' shorter-ranged weapons came into range: avenger gatling cannons, and Hanto's own thermal cannon. He zeroed in on a Malcador battle tank and fired the gun with a thought. A shimmer of agitated air marked the passage of his thermal spear. It struck the tank's glacis, vaporising it. The crew inside would have cooked to death before exploding ammunition blew it apart, the shrapnel slaying dozens of men around it.

The Knights crashed home. Their chainswords swung in bloody arcs. Anti-armour weapons took their toll, bringing low the flower of House Procon Vi. Adhesive explosives lobbed at legs blew out joints. Knights were dragged from cockpit hatches and butchered, or burned alive in their warsuits.

Hanto strode through his foe, his mind absorbed with the task of multiple target acquisition and despatch. It occurred to him the enemy were behaving oddly. Their fire line had been disciplined, but they reacted sluggishly to the Knights' charge when it hit, neither reorganising themselves nor fleeing, as most sane men would.

The triumphant wails of Titan war-horns at his back distracted him from the problem. A drop-ship was hit multiple times, collapsing in on itself. A second was ablaze. The Knights had played their role, screening the Titans as they moved in to break through.

Legio first, he thought, and continued to kill.

'All ahead full, into the sea,' Esha ordered. The Legio was arranged in a tight block, the Titans kicking their way through the shattered centre of the enemy encirclement. Ahead, the glittering poison of the Chymist's Sea enticed her onwards. A portion of Hanto's Knights loped off, sweeping the rising dunes for threats. The remainder held their ground, pinning open the gap through the enemy lines for the god-engines.

The enemy were collapsing their flanks inwards, funnelling men and machines

towards the break-through point and advancing from the rear. Their encirclement was drawing noose tight. Weapons fire slammed relentlessly into the void shields of *Domine Ex Venari*, but she would not turn the engine to fire back; she could not afford to slow the Legio by having them present weapons to the enemy and walk backwards to the water. Then they would be trapped.

Elements of the Fasadian armour were abandoning their attack and accelerating towards the sea in a race with the god-engines. If they arrived on the beach in any appreciable numbers before the Titans then Esha's plan might fail.

'All power to locomotors,' she said. In her mind's eye, barred power indicators showing the weapons' reactor draw dropped away. The Titan lurched as it picked up speed.

The rest moved with her. *Pilum Aurae*, of the Warlords, was limping badly on a leg whose knee had locked and was falling behind as a result. Its dragging foot carved a trench in the wastes. As they reached the edge of the dunes, it stopped, and began to turn about.

Esha voxed the princeps. 'Gophan Niri, what are you doing?'

'Legio first, princeps senioris,' came the reply. *'I will delay them.'*

The Warlord swung ponderously around, guns raking the enemy forces before it had completed its turn. The rest walked on past their wounded sibling. Void shields fell. Titans took damage, some of it serious, but none debilitating. Men ran around their feet like rodents; they scurried to and fro, impotent in the face of the god-machines' wrath. *Domine Ex Venari* trampled them under its feet, its point defence weaponry killing them where they presented themselves as targets. Esha swept her mighty metallic head back and forth, seeking priority targets, marking them for machine and moderati, letting their will guide the righteous vengeance of the Machine-God while she scanned on further, her huntress' sensibilities bound to the sight and senses of the machine. She walked in the presence of god. She was the Omnissiah's displeasure manifest.

She passed over the thin line of dunes that held sea back from land. They were a pattern on the floor to her, not a real obstacle, and she stepped through them in three swift strides that left footprint-craters metres deep.

From the dunes, the land sloped a little more steeply to the water. She plunged on, beating the tank outriders to the surf, just. Squadrons of them were rearing up over the last sand hills, skidding down the far sides. A few turned hasty turrets towards her, flinging their ire at her majesty. With a thought, Esha swung out the Titan's left arm and obliterated them.

Men floundered into the waves before her. They ran oddly, not fleeing, it

appeared, but directionless, or aiming weapons that could do her no harm. They passed under the void shields as she swept by. Their lasguns burned fine tracks into her skin, no more an inconvenience than the brush of a fly's wings. They died under her feet, their passing staining the water red, but they were not afraid, and that was curious. Some fired magnetic grapnel lines up at her hips, fifteen metres over their heads. She laughed a symphonic war-horn blurt at their efforts, and strode over them. Other Titans followed her, the water building up around their ankles, then to their knees. Their pursuers could come no closer. The open ocean lay ahead.

A sonorous alarm sounded. The first void shield was close to failure.

'Turn about face!' she commanded.

Domine Ex Venari turned around. The first void went down, causing an expanding, foaming ring to form in the water's surface, and sending a shockwave of rainbow spray outwards in a perfect circle. Her sister Titans passed by her ocular sensors, taking the water in a line with quiet dignity, while a horde of insects upon the shore attempted to discomfit them.

A trail of wreckage led down from the dunes and the path beaten through them by the Legio. *Domine Ex Venari* was tall enough to see clearly over the dunes to the broken drop-ships on the far side. Thick black clouds of smoke rose from their ruin. The bodies of men lay everywhere, crushed into the sand, blasted to scraps by Titan weaponry. Tanks burned. There were casualties from the Legio, of course. A Warhound lay face-down in the dunes. A Reaver rolled upon its back, trying the impossible feat of rising. The enemy were still coming. *Pilum Aurae*'s last field went out, and shots began to hammer into his armour. The Knights splashed along the water's edge, turning to *Domine Ex Venari*'s left, accelerating away from the enemy so they could come about and get around the enemy's rear. Already Third, Sixth and Ninth Maniples were ploughing deeper into the water, beginning their own slow arc that would see them follow the Knights and outflank the enemy.

'Buy our flanking force time. Destroy them!' she screamed. *Domine Ex Venari* howled; its song was picked up by the others, until every Titan in the line blared anger at their betrayers, a wall of noise that should have shattered the enemy through terror alone, but still they kept on coming.

'Half speed back, target the tanks. Third, Sixth and Ninth Maniples, good hunting.'

The Titans waded backwards into the sea, firing all guns as they went. The thunder of their guns was deafening, a rolling, snapping, crashing wall of sound

that obliterated the roar of the ocean. The waves were wiped from existence by the return fire of the enemy and void shield displacement activity. Beach and water churned into dirty foam that barely had time to settle before another shell hit sent it pluming upwards. Laser blasters turned the sand into glass. Missile hits filled it with craters. Gatling blasters dug trenches with bullets the size of men's heads. The air was soon so thick with spray, sand, smoke and blood it made a grotesque kind of fog.

Domine Ex Venari was up to its waist in water when a new alarm rang. Esha had heard it so few times she failed to recognise what it signalled. A thrill of fear from the Titan's machine-spirit let her know.

'Boarders! Yeha, take the strain a moment.'

'Aye, Esha.'

The crushing weight of dominating the Titan passed from Esha. Free of its presence, she sent her consciousness into the subsystems, checking little-used augur eyes arrayed in armoured housings upon the Titan's surface.

She caught the boarders at the back, about to breach the door. There were five of them, wearing fully enclosed carapace armour rigged with climbing gear. They clung to the shoulders around the access portal with magnetic pads. Some of the grapnel firers had been successful after all.

They activated a fusion device, and swung out of the way. Its detonation took out the watching augur along with the door.

Yeha Yeha groaned with effort. She was of princeps material, perhaps, but was a long way from commanding her own Titan. Esha quickly dipped back into the manifold. The moderati primus gave a noise of relief, blood trickling from her nose behind her helm's visor.

Alarms whooped from every part of the czella. Snapping lasgun fire rattled around the atrium, audible even through the thick cockpit door, as emplaced lasers dropped out of the ceiling and raked the room. They were silenced. Esha could get no vid-feed from the room on the other side of the czella door.

'Weapons moderati, report,' she voxed.

The three of them voxed back quickly, stating their names. Their voices were distant. All three were deep in the manifold, and ignorant of what was happening within the Titan.

'Omega-6, report in,' she voxed.

No reply. The enemy could be battering their way into the reactor. Down there, in the cramped space around the core, was the realm of the Titan enginseer. He was alone, overseeing the dozen slaved servitors bonded to the machine directly,

whose neural architecture supplied part of the basis for the Titan's own mind. If the enemy got in there…

Switching back and forth between the view of the battle and the czella made her head spin. On the shore, the enemy infantry had come as far as the water. The tanks stopped within the shelter of the dunes, where mounded sand would blunt the impact of god-weapons. A barrage rippled along their line like a salute. Each impact weakened a void shield, nudging their efficacy down, allowing shots to pass through. When the last failed, the hail of explosives would hammer into plasteel skin. On their own the tank shots were insignificant blows. Together they could slay a demigod.

A clang rang off the czella door. A point of bright, molten light grew in the centre. Intolerable heat burned Esha's back, and *Domine Ex Venari*'s war-horns blared in sympathetic pain.

Esha slapped the restraint release on her harness, got up and drew her laspistol. The interface cable pulled painfully at her skull. She was still fully bonded via the MIU, and the interior of the cabin and the battle outside superimposed over each other sickeningly.

She could still see well enough to shoot. A Fasadian burst through the door, his face hidden behind a snout-like breathing mask. She raised her gun. The Titan lurched as it clumsily mirrored her movement. The man stumbled into the room, arms outstretched. She shot him through the heart, too late to stop the grenade bouncing down into the well where the moderati sat.

It went off with a sharp crack like a firework. Metal stung her shoulder. Yeha screamed, and Mephani slumped over her smoking console. Fire caught in her deck, setting her body afire.

Esha had no time to attend to the unfolding disaster. There was a second man behind the first. He wore no mask. His face was ghastly pale, showing the expression of a man undergoing a palsy. His muscles twitched; he drooled. His eyes rolled. He raised his gun stiffly, as if he were fighting his own movements.

'I can't… I can't…' he said. The gun shook. 'My name is Etan Boq. I am loyal to the Emperor!'

Esha moved to the side. The Titan moved with her, nearly falling off balance, its stabilisers working at full capacity. Boq stumbled sideways into the doorjamb, sending his shot wide. The las-bolt hit Esha in the shoulder. Her arm went dead and her gun fell from her hand. She cried out, and *Domine Ex Venari s*creamed with her. Boq grunted with effort, trying to keep the gun down. She saw now that a blood-crusted device was clamped to his forehead. A single, red point of light

glimmered malevolently on its side.

'No! No!' he moaned. 'My name is Etan Boq! I am loyal to the Emperor!'

The gun pointed at her head.

Esha stared at him.

'I'm sorry,' he said.

Boq cried out, and lifted into the air. The point of a mechadendrite emerged from his chest. He blinked in surprise, and dropped to the floor, revealing Omega-6 in the doorway.

'Neuro-slaves,' said the tech-priest. 'Diabolical technologies. The Dark Mechanicum throw all morality into the smelter in their rush for knowledge. They will damn us all.' His bloodied appendage whisked back beneath his robes, and he toed the body with an armoured foot. 'This poor soul betrayed no one.'

Fire suppressant gushed from an extinguisher. Jephenir Jehan doused the body of her comrade. The smell of burnt meat and chemicals choked them all.

Omega-6's hood rustled as he looked up at Esha. 'Can you fight, princeps?'

Esha probed the cauterised wound in her shoulder. She winced. She could not move her arm, but she did not need to. She nodded.

'Moderati primus?' asked Omega-6.

Yeha Yeha made a grunt that carried more affirmation than pain.

'Then I shall be back into my chamber,' said Omega-6. 'This battle is not over.'

He went away towards the rear of the atrium. Bright light, reflected from the surface of the Chymist's Sea, blazed through the shattered doorway into the czella. Wincing, Esha lowered herself back into the chair.

'Let us finish this,' she said.

The manifold rushed up to engulf her, taking away the greater part of her pain, and the battle outside refocused in her mind, once more supplanting the cockpit view.

More of the enemy were forming up. There were three lines of tanks now bombarding the Legio. Their tactics were suicidal and made no sense. She understood why. The finesse of control granted by the neuro-units was probably not great.

The enemy were dying in droves, but it was a battle of mutual annihilation. Another two engines had fallen, their overheating reactors boiling the sea into scalding mist.

War-horns blared on the far side of the gun line. Giant shapes swaggered out of the murk of battle: seven war engines from Third, Sixth and Ninth Maniples. Two Warhounds emerged first, inferno guns scouring the dunes clear with giant

plumes of flame.

From the far end of the enemy battleline lesser war-horns sang. The remaining Knights of House Procon Vi attacked the enemy from the left, rolling up the flank.

‘Open fire!’ Esha screamed.

The Titans in the sea aimed everything at the Fasadian centre.

Trapped between the two halves of the demi-Legio, the enemy were annihilated, their broken remnants driven into the sea.

Not one of the enslaved Fasadians survived, but as Esha reflected later, in slaughtering their own people they had done the enemy’s work for them.

No attack came from the Hanjin Wastes after all, but there would be no reinforcements either.

Domine Ex Veari

Reaver Titan Domine Ex Venari

NINETEEN

The Emperor's Sons

Upon the fringes of the Beta-Garmon system, the veil between the worlds parted, and a fleet of incomparable size sailed free of the madness behind the world. Ships came in such number they blocked the light of the stars. Battlebarges, cruisers, battleships, carriers, troop ships by the hundred. On and on they came, a gathering of might that had emptied the crowded orbits of Terra. At their head flew the *Red Tear*, the primarch Sanguinius' command vessel, an immense Gloriana-class battleship of rare make. Its form was unique and far divergent from its sisters, being cleverly remade to resemble the winged blood-drop badge of the IX Legion.

Sanguinius ordered the oculus shutters opened before the last of the warp's unclean energies had bled off, so the crew of the *Red Tear* were forced to hold up their hands to their eyes to shield them against the otherworldly fires streaming off the flagship's prow. Sanguinius stared into them as intently as an oracle reading the patterns of less uncanny flames. What he scried within them, he told no one, but took a stern expression upon his face, sat back in his throne and spoke.

'So this is what Rogal's muster has bequeathed us.'

The curls of the warp's embrace flickered to nothing, giving clear view of a boiling sea of incandescent gas. No enemy awaited them. A signal from First Captain Raldoron saw five hundred warriors in red relax their weapons from firing positions around the edges of the command deck. Their movement was a

sudden clatter, loud in the quiet of diligent men and women at work, then as suddenly gone. The Space Marines became still as statues, only the quiet hum of their battleplate reactors hinting at their living nature.

Beside Sanguinius' throne was a second seat also made for a primarch's stature, but Jaghatai Khan, for whom it had been installed, did not sit in it. The Lord of the Ordu had no use for thrones. He was poised forever on the edge of action, like his hawk namesake, ready to abandon its station in the sky and plunge down, talons outstretched, into bloody conflict.

'The Garmon Nebula is born anew,' the Khan said. He folded his arms. Like his brother, he was fully armoured.

Many places in the cluster that had been pure black now glowed with the embers of war. The Khan did not misspeak; it was as if the cloud of gas that had birthed the cluster had returned.

'How many ships must have died to provide us this display?' Sanguinius said. 'We sail into a sea of fire.'

The Khan's eyes moved across the view, unerringly seeking out each of the cluster's major systems. He was so farsighted, and so calm, one could believe he saw onto the surfaces of those distant worlds and found no challenge there.

'Thousands,' said Jaghatai. 'More.' He looked to his brother. 'This is as bad as we feared.'

'Worse,' said Sanguinius. He was pensive. Where Jaghatai seemed to look into every cranny of reality, Sanguinius stared beyond at a darkness mortal men could not apprehend. The Great Angel had changed, as had all the Emperor's loyal sons, but the pain of treachery laid more heavily on Sanguinius than it did the others. One gold-clad hand clenched his throne arm, the other moved up to his chin. His wings twitched, rattling the ornaments adorning them.

'We expected to fight our way through,' said Khan. 'Where is the enemy?'

'I believe we are late,' said Sanguinius. 'Timecheck!' he called down to an instrument pit built into the floor.

'The voyage was passable,' said the Khan, continuing their conversation as the crew rushed to fulfil Sanguinius' request.

'The warp is still in turmoil. The storm may be over, but the powers within work against us.'

An unmodified human in a Blood Angels fleet uniform presented the primarch with a scrap of paper.

'We are late,' said Sanguinius. He handed the note to his brother. 'Weeks late. Open all vox frequencies,' he called to his crew. 'Send out messages via every

means to all loyal factions. Inform them of my presence.'

'Keep me out of it, brother,' said Jaghatai. 'Our plans should remain as we agreed.'

'As we discussed,' said Sanguinius. 'Let your announcement be the roaring of your guns and engines. I shall be the hammer blow, you the striking dagger. Do you know where you shall go first?'

'I have a few ideas,' said Jaghatai. 'I find it best not to tie myself to plans. To the likes of Dorn, plans are the walls of a fortress – to me they are the bars of the cage. I go where the wind blows me.'

'You are the wind, Jaghatai, the hurricane, the tornado!' said Sanguinius.

'Sometimes I am, when opportunity permits,' said the Khan. 'Move fast, strike hard. Improvise. But no hurricane, no matter how it gusts, can blow out the fire we see here.'

Sanguinius nodded. The light from the burning clouds ahead lit his face in fiery orange, and turned his wings golden. 'If only we could.' He looked to his brother. 'That is not our purpose. If we can stop Horus, we shall, but having seen the void itself aflame, I say Dorn's assessments were correct. The matter will not be settled at Beta-Garmon. We bleed him. We break his forces. We steal as much of his might and his impetus as we can, then we depart to rejoin Rogal.'

The Khan inclined his head in acknowledgement. 'I thank you for your company during this voyage.' He paused. 'I have been a little too eager to retain my independence. It has been a pleasure to spend some more time with you.' He looked at this brother with proud eyes. There was a yearning to be away in them, but he spoke sincerely.

Sanguinius bowed his head. 'My hospitality is ever at your disposal, brother.'

'And mine at yours,' said the Khan. 'I will ready my Legion. I shall inform you of my first target decisions before we depart. After that you shall know of my deeds by the cries of our enemies.'

'As it should be.'

'No doubt we shall not meet again until we stand shoulder to shoulder upon the walls of the palace.'

Sanguinius stood from his throne. Jewels tinkled all over his armour and wings. He embraced his brother, and rested his cheek against the Khan's.

'Make sure you return, my brother.' His words were a sorrowful whisper in the other's ear. 'There are too few of us to stand against him. If we are both lost here, we doom our father.'

'Nothing shall stop me.'

‘That I wholeheartedly believe.’

‘You will also be there,’ said the Khan.

Sanguinius’ beautiful eyes closed against a private pain. ‘We shall see.’

They parted. The Khan grinned. ‘You will be there, the Great Angel, stood against the coming dark!’ He gestured at the burning void. ‘This sally is but an appetiser. The feast of war awaits us on Terra, and you will have a place at the table. It can be no other way.’

‘We must trust that it is so.’ Sanguinius’ smile could not hide his sorrow.

‘Until next time.’ The Khan laid his hand on his brother’s shoulder. Their gazes locked. ‘Do not do anything rash.’

‘I shall try not to.’

The Khan nodded, and walked away. The Sanguinary Guard stationed by the main access portal to the command deck clashed their weapons in salute as he departed.

Sanguinius sat back upon his throne. ‘Raldoron,’ he said, calling his First Captain to him. ‘Oversee the gathering of intelligence. Present it to me as it comes in.’

For many hours Sanguinius remained on the command deck as the fleet hung stationary in the void. At first there was no response from the beleaguered worlds and Sanguinius was left to brood. His visions of death had not left him, and though he had come to terms with what must happen, the fact he did not know when or where his death would befall him tore at him. The Warmaster could be speeding towards his fleet that very moment. He might have only hours to live. He could have months. But he was going to die, that much was sure.

There remained the possibility that he rushed too fast for this confrontation. Knowing the future made it harder to deal with. Was he, in fact, responsible for his own death? Were the visions he suffered of his bloodied corpse and Horus’ triumphant face the result of his own impetuous need to see out the prophecy? He was numbed by the paradox. Act, don’t act – the decision tormented him, despite his resolve to see past the hard trammels of fate and forge his own destiny. His experiences on Davin had removed most of his doubts, but intensified others.

He thought of his wayward brother, the Night Haunter, whom he had cast adrift in space.

I think, thought Sanguinius, that I understand you now, Konrad. You go to your fate, and I go to mine.

The *Red Tear* knew his pain. Like him, it had been deeply hurt, and like him it had yet to be fully restored. Guilliman's shipwrights had done their best during the heretical days of Imperium Secundus, but much good work had been undone again by the *Veritas Ferrum*, the daemon ship sent to bar them from Davin. He felt its aches as his own. Both appeared hale on the surface. Both were wounded in the heart.

A deep gloom descended over the primarch, in which he was lost for some time, staring out of the oculus at the sea of fire. In his mind he saw Horus' face, bloated beyond recognition by dark powers. He saw the swing of his maul. He saw his own death again. And again. He remembered the price his sons would pay, the twin curses unleashed by his demise. If there was any viable alternative, he would take it, but on offer were only two differing sorts of damnation. The sense of purpose he had found on Davin was fragile. Like a fire, it required tending. Its fuel was faith, and Sanguinius found his faith wanting.

'My lord.' Raldoron's words penetrated Sanguinius' thoughts, but did not rouse him. He heard them as an echo of a memory, something caught just on the edge of hearing as the maul descended again. 'My lord. Sanguinius.' The First Captain's hand rested on the golden forearm of his lord, small as a child attempting to comfort his father.

Sanguinius came abruptly alert at the contact, making Raldoron take a wary step back.

The Great Angel looked about himself in confusion, unsure of where he was. His face cleared.

'Raldoron.'

The captain saluted. 'The first communication has arrived.' He held out a plastek flimsy, printed with hard black words.

Sanguinius took it. He scanned the marks of purity and relay details. It had come from the command centre of Alpha-Garmon, passed through the great Carthega Telepathica, the giant temple-relay on Beta-Garmon II.

He glanced up.

'Is this all it says?'

'Besides the detail, yes,' Raldoron said.

Sanguinius returned his eyes to the single line of text, translated from a psyker's dream. Below it were columns of information of military strength and current strategic circumstance, but the personal message held his attention.

Sanguinius read it aloud. 'Thank the Emperor.'

Then communications from all over Beta-Garmon began to arrive.

The astropathic messages trickled in slowly, in ones and twos at first. When a few more hours had passed, they became a flood.

A picture was pieced together quickly from the flow of information. A large tactical cartolith was ignited, and as each scrap of data was processed, more of the situation in Beta-Garmon was filled in.

Dorn's Great Muster had not proceeded to plan. A lack of coordination was apparent right across the warzone. Within the first day, several commanders presented themselves as being in overall command, three of them openly denouncing the claims of the others. So many different armies, ranging in size from ragged bands of survivors to entire battlegroups, had arrived in the cluster from all over the Imperium that it would tax even Sanguinius to organise.

'Dozens of worlds, millions of men, scores of Titan Legios,' he said, going over the latest batch of communiques. 'All arriving from different directions, under different commanders and at different times.'

'Too much of it is being fed piecemeal into the grinder,' said Raldoron, gesturing at the hololith. 'There is effectively no organisation here. Why are these Titan Legios throwing themselves into battle alone? Why do they not fight together?'

'They are proud and independent,' said Sanguinius, 'even of the forge worlds they protect. The reorganisation of the Mechanicum is further compounding the problem.'

'It is madness. They are discarding our opportunity for victory.'

Sanguinius looked at his gene son. 'In similar circumstances, we would be no different.' Sanguinius set the data-slate aside. 'What can we expect? The ripples from the Ruinstorm yet perturb communications and transit. This is the great war of our epoch. More than guns endanger us. The so-called gods themselves work against our every effort.'

'This is not Signus Prime,' countered Raldoron. 'There is no mention of daemons in the messages. The materium is free of Neverborn taint.'

'It is not Signus Prime,' said Sanguinius. 'Nor is it the madness of Davin, or the insanity of the *Veritas Ferrum*, but daemons and poisoned reality are not the only tools of our foes. There are many assets here that were once the Emperor's to command. We are opposed by the great entities of the warp. No war will ever be simple again. There can be no victory here, only the forestalling of defeat.'

'Even so,' said Raldoron, 'we have the Carthega. It should be a tool for command, but instead it is used for the listing of the slain. The tally of the dead grows longer by the hour. What purpose does it serve to mourn the dead when

the living still die?'

'With no one to issue commands, it is unsurprising it is put to this use. It is a cry of pain to Terra, which I have answered.' He stood. 'Raldoron, call together my captains and my Chapter Masters. We have enough information to construct a plan of war. We meet in the prime strategium within the hour. Make it so now.'

'My lord,' Raldoron bowed.

Sanguinius raised his voice to address the command-deck crew. 'The rest of you here, continue your spying. Bring me everything there is to know about the cluster. I do not expect my brother to show himself to me without effort on our part, but I will face him. Seek him out, find me the *Vengeful Spirit.* Find me the Warmaster, so that we might bring him to heel.'

The crew redoubled their efforts. Servitors ground out mechanical affirmations of orders received. As Sanguinius noted their diligence with satisfaction, fresh lights shone in the void. He looked out to see the White Scars vessels pulling away from the greater armada alone. That was their way, to hunt and fight without support, striking with no warning. The great ships seemed to move slowly, but they were accelerating all the while, and soon they were only bright points amid the universe's display of cosmic baubles. Then the void shivered, and the White Scars slipped into the warp, and their lights were gone.

'Good hunting, brother,' said Sanguinius.

Messages came through from the Khan, and were brought to his attention. Sanguinius waved them away. He did not need informing of Jaghatai's first target. If he knew his enigmatic brother at all, it would be a worthy strike.

He sat and became thoughtful again as he awaited the gathering of his Legion. A black humour settled deep into his bones.

For the first time since his struggles at Signus Prime, he was truly alone.

TWENTY

Disaster at Theta-Garmon

Nuntio Dolores prowled across a metal plain larger than a continent. 103-4 was a gargantuan assembly plant where subassemblies were brought together and made into voidships. An artificial construct that size was massy enough to generate its own gravity field. Areas of higher density boasted a natural pull close to a third of Terra. Where the plate thinned, or was hollow with vast dry-docks or construction halls, it tailed to nothing. Gravitic topography was complicated by the varying supply of artificial pull to different parts. Gravity lenses formed in places where multiple inhabited decks were stacked atop each other, the effects of their grav-plating magnifying each other. Conversely, where the orbital plate had taken heavy damage and power was lacking, there was precious little pull. The effect for a Titan was akin to negotiating a treacherous mudflat, where one wrong step could see a man sucked into deep quicksand, or plunged over his head into water. Harrtek kept a gravity map front and centre of his MIU interface, using that more than the visual cues the landscape had to offer to plot his course.

No ship had been made at 103-4 for three years. It had suffered extensively. Giant craters surrounded by petals of blackened metal peeled up by internal explosions scarred the surface. Huge, sudden holes, steep and straight-sided as wells, opened without warning in front of him, the result of lance hits. Other starship weapons had carved their own, unique signatures into the body of the orbital, overlaid by the lesser marks of Titan weaponry. But 103-4's sheer size

made it a prize worth fighting over. It was a stable island in the dark which offered control over numerous attendant satellite realms. The Gardoman Hub rotated twenty thousand kilometres away, its details model fine. Iridium was a toy moon decorated with brutal, industrial adornment. Dozens of other orbitals swarmed around 103-4, near and far, damaged and whole. 103-4 was the ruined capital of a rich kingdom, and so the Legio Vulpa went to war over it again.

Four days ago, thousands of Imperial ships had burst from the warp and made directly for Theta-Garmon V. Accompanying them were the god-machines of Legio Atarus, the Firebrands. Unlike the Imperial Hunters they replaced, the Legio Atarus were a confrontational Legio, closer in character to the Legio Vulpa. Even their colours were similar, being red, black and gold. The balance of their engines was of middling classes – Reavers, Nightgaunts and Carnivores – but the aggressive manner in which they deployed them made up for the relative paucity of heavier machines.

Harrtek looked forward to facing them again.

War raged in a blazing storm all around Theta-Garmon V. The Legio Solaria might not have achieved much directly, but the Iridium moon was the gap into which the pry-bar of Legio Atarus was inserted. The loyalist forces rapidly reinforced their holdings there, and began immediate operations to retake Theta-Garmon V. All over the sprawling void-yards, Titans of Legios Fureans, Atarus and Vulpa were embroiled in deadly battle, while the endless black of the void was turned white by the fury of starships.

Five maniples of the Death Stalkers defended 103-4. They marched across the central portions of its hugeness in a loose crescent twenty-five kilometres across towards the drop zone of Legio Atarus. There were hundreds of Titans present in the battlesphere, but its sheer size meant they were thinly spread. The traitors were at a disadvantage, forced to defend everywhere while the loyalists could pick the field of their choosing, safe under the protection of their superior fleet.

Harrtek watched dozens of contacts coming in fast under heavy void ship escort. Coffin and drop-ships detached from Titan conveyors and came speedily down to the surface. In the maps projected into his mind's eye the contacts split, new dots budding from the originals like bacilli growing from their parent cells.

<They have brought their entire Legio with them,> he thought out to his fellow princeps.

<Atarus are weaklings, secundus grading. I count no more than fifty of their engines. Mostly medium weight classes,> Venedir Antekk, princeps majoris of Maniple Four thought back at him via the machine telepathy of the manifold.

<We boast fifteen Warlords. They have eight.>

<They outnumber us two to one,> said Bennif Durant. His tone, conveyed with a blazing lack of subtlety by the infosphere link, made Harrtek grin.

<Never count anything with fewer guns than your own engine, boy,> Antekk thought back. <And if they are all in one place, then they might be destroyed in one fell swoop. The New Mechanicum promises us victory. The Firebrands shall regret this little foray against the Death Stalkers!>

The minds of all connected swelled with pride. In the conjoined mentalities of the crews and machine-spirits of each individual Titan the pride was strongest, but it bled out along the slender links binding machines into maniples, and maniples into demi-Legio, momentarily uniting them into something bigger than man or machine.

They were Legio.

Harrtek checked the mission timer. It ran backwards towards the Mechanicum's surprise, and the promise of victory. Ardim Protos' Mechanicum acolytes assured them Atarus would fall. Vulpa's concentration upon 103-4 was the bait to the trap. Elsewhere, a similar ploy was being undertaken by Legio Fureans: middling strength concentrations of Titans to lure out the full force of their enemy.

This better work, Harrtek thought. We have too many engines held in reserve to win by honest means.

<All maniples halt.> The order came from Feydoon Bavin of Maniple Nine, voted seniores for the engagement.

Harrtek bristled still at Bavin's election. The others had snubbed him after the Legio Solaria assault. They thought him a coward for not attacking during the last battle, even when Maniple Eighteen's idiotic ambush had cost them two of its engines. He was in poor humour. His head ached, and *Nuntio Dolores* was being difficult. Relying on the schemes of tech-priests to save them from Bavin's lack of tactical subtlety poisoned his mood further.

<We have reached the outer perimeter of our ground defences,> Bavin went on. >Any further from here and we shall be easy prey to their voidships.>

Harrtek brought his maniple to a halt a little ahead of the others in the shadow of a tower five thousand storeys tall. Blackened holes riddled its sides, big enough that the void war could be viewed on the other side.

Surface turrets panned endlessly back and forth, their servitor control systems locked in a permanent seek and destroy pattern. These were only small, anti-munition and anti-fighter positions. The voidship killers were several kilometres

back, clustered in groups around the deep shafts of power exchangers where they could tap directly into the reactors deep within the structure. Such weapons could hit any target around the orbital plate. The lack of defensive coverage at the Legio's current position was more about the ability of multiple batteries to work together than a question of range. Past Harrtek's location the station was dead, its power relays smashed, halls open and weapons inactive. Beyond the point of good function the certainty of swift ship kills diminished, and the chances of god-engine loss to the guns of the enemy navy increased.

That was why Atarus was setting down there.

Titan eyes scanned the horizon. Despite 103-4's vastness, the horizon was near, hard against the black; a cliff edge that ended in nothingness.

Legio Atarus appeared as a line of winking dots. Without atmosphere to refract light, they were as sharply defined as if they were a hundred metres away, so much so they seemed like miniature representations of themselves. The void robbed distance of its power, broke the laws of perspective, and made the immense tiny.

<Legio Atarus lead elements thirty thousand metres and closing,> reported Harrtek's moderati sensorius.

Well within effective missile range, thought Harrtek. *Nuntio Dolores*' mighty soul grumbled in agreement – too much, in fact. Harrtek felt the volcano cannon ready to fire at the machine's own behest, and he was forced to exert his will to stop it.

A few seconds after, the line of advancing god-engines sparkled. Fiery darts arced from their backs, levelled off, and descended towards the Legio Vulpa. The missiles were lost in the blazing storm of ship on ship battles raging in the void all around the planet. The defence turrets around Maniple Seven's position saw the missiles before Harrtek caught sight of them again, angled upwards and opened fire. *Nuntio Dolores*' subsystems peeped out small warnings. Explosions erupted half a kilometre out all along Legio Vulpa's line as the missiles were hit and destroyed. Several got through, slamming into the shielded bodies of the Death Stalkers. The Warlord *Benediction of Blood* took four direct hits, its void shields blurring, sparking and collapsing one after the other, leaving it naked of protection.

<First volley to them, no effect. Return fire now,> commanded Bavin.

Those Titans so equipped opened up with their carapace-mounted missile batteries. Apocalypse launchers spat out rapid volleys. *Nuntio Dolores* shifted jealously. In the airless void, the exhaust fires of the projectiles glared brightly,

flaring in the Titan's autosenses and cutting down visibility for the fraction of a second that they climbed up and away from their firers. More than half of the demi-Legio's Warlords present had laser blasters rather than missile pods, *Nuntio Dolores* included. Giant servomotors sang through the hull as the twin guns angled forwards, locking onto targets ordained by Bavin.

Harrtek thought little of the princeps seniores' firing solutions, and from the sensation given out by *Nuntio Dolores*' machine-spirit, the Titan didn't rate them either, but Harrtek followed them as commanded, thought-ordering his weapons moderati to lock onto a Nightgaunt strutting across the metal plains. Harrtek upped *Nuntio Dolores*' magnification, bringing the smaller Titan racing towards him as if he himself flew over the orbital shell. The view jumped a little, and it took longer than it should to bring it back into focus.

The machine moved around points of gravitic instability with a surety that crossed the line into arrogance. Its banners rippled oddly in the vacuum, sent into shivering, regular waves solely by the Titan's movement. White and black bars covered its greaves. Badges proclaiming loyalty to the throne of Terra and the exiles of Mars covered its heraldry plates.

It deserves to die simply for that, thought Harrtek.

More missiles flew silently from the backs of Legio Atarus. They crossed paths with those of Legio Vulpa's and descended. Shield flare glimmered across the Atarus front, encasing the god-engines in glittering ovoids.

<Enemy void shields remain intact. Legio Vulpa, hold fire,> commanded Bavin.

Because your firing solutions are worthless, thought Harrtek. Echoes of his dissatisfaction passed into *Nuntio Dolores*, and became waves that rippled out across the demi-Legio.

Legio Atarus' princeps seniores was evidently of higher quality than Bavin. Rather than spread among all Titans, Atarus' missiles continued their relentless homing in on a handful of machines. Though protected by the orbital's point defences, enough of the missiles got through to give concern, rocking the shieldless *Benediction of Blood*, and bringing down the voids on one of the Reavers.

Titans move quickly. They appear ponderous, their strides as slow as the turning of the day, but like the speed of the sun through the sky, their slowness is an illusion. Pushing their reactors hard, Atarus' Titans neared quickly, despite the dangerous terrain.

'Damn it, Bavin! Adopt concentrated firing patterns. They'll all get here if you

continue this pointless split barrage,' Harrtek lost his temper and shouted over the vox. He regretted his outburst instantly when *Nuntio Dolores*' spirit rebuked him with a wordless jolt of pain.

<Remain calm,> Bavin replied via the Legio infosphere. <The vox is weakness. The soul of the machine is all. Stay bonded, or lose our respect. You were not voted seniores today. I was, therefore you shall obey me. Hold fire until I deem fit.>

<Range fifteen thousand kilometres and closing,> Harrtek's moderati sensorius reported, prompted, no doubt, by *Nuntio Dolores*' own frustration at the lack of activity.

<Stand,> Harrtek thought-pulsed to his crew, though he was not concerned with them. He could feel the Titan's eagerness to engage. Its soul tensed under his mind like it was about to bolt.

Bavin's fresh firing plan cascaded through the infosphere. Harrtek dismissed it.

<Volcano cannon, target Nightgaunt *War Wrought*, left arm,> he said.

His crew hesitated. <But, my lord, Princeps Seniores Bavin–>

Harrtek's rage at his weapons moderati lashed through the manifold like a whip. He felt the man's mind buckle under his fury.

'I am princeps of Maniple Seven!' he shouted into the czella. 'This is my domain. You will do as I say. Target volcano cannon as commanded.' He slipped back into the manifold. <Aim laser blasters to this point, my command. Make him dance to our tune.>

Harrtek highlighted a section of the station skin where a dip in his gravity map suggested a large void close to the surface. The data passed into the minds of his crew and Titan as if there were no barrier between their souls.

Power built in *Nuntio Dolores*' weapons feeds. Harrtek felt it as a rising of pressure along his arms and back. Together he and the Titan trembled in anticipation of release.

<Open fire,> Bavin commanded.

Legio Vulpa let fly with every weapon they possessed. Bavin utilised a standard Titan versus Titan fire pattern, matching larger engines against weaker in an attempt to wear down void shields across the front and bring down large portions of the enemy simultaneously. It was a tactic Harrtek disapproved of greatly. His preference was for certain engine kills that eroded the enemy's forces gradually but certainly. The same tactic that the Legio Atarus were currently employing.

The effect of Bavin's plan was admittedly spectacular. A wall of fire and energy flare leapt up along the leading edge of Atarus' advance. Void shields gave out in

dazzling displays of discharge. One of Atarus' Titans stopped dead, its head destroyed by a lucky hit. In response, scything volcano cannon beams amputated the arm of *Benediction of Blood*.

<Fire volcano cannon,> Harrtek commanded.

Nuntio Dolores' reactor pulsed hotly. Harrtek's eyes slid closed with pleasure. A searing beam ripped out from the volcano cannon, slamming into the left of the Nightgaunt. Its voids rippled but held. Predictably, the Nightgaunt swung to its right to throw off *Nuntio Dolores*' aim, just as Harrtek anticipated.

<Laser blasters, open fire.>

The Warlord leaned forwards, aiming its carapace weapon at the ground in the Nightgaunt's path. The gestalt of Titan and crew released the building power of the guns at precisely the right moment, smashing open the hull of the orbital as the lighter Titan was raising its foot. It had no time to react; the crew probably didn't even see the pitfall until it was too late. The foot descended into a gaping hole, and the Titan crashed down hard. Void shields glared with power overdraw. Sections of metal around the cavity exploded into sparks as their matter was displaced into the immaterium, widening the hole further, until it was big enough to swallow the Titan completely. The last of its shields burst, leaving the edges glowing like the embers of burned paper. The head slammed into the lip of the chasm, snapping it back into the carapace. A botched ejection sent it skidding across the surface of 103-4 while its body, limbs limp, fell into oblivion.

<Engine kill. Engine kill. Engine kill.> A servitor bonded to the wall spoke the words over and over again.

<That is the way to victory,> he thought out to the Legio. <First kill to *Nuntio Dolores.* Again.>

Vulpa had the advantage for the moment: sheltered, given extra protection by the defence turrets, and able to better aim their weapons. That would not last. As soon as the lines drew nearer, being stationary would become a disadvantage. Bavin saw this, and issued the order to withdraw. The Legio fell back as one group, still hammering at the line of the advancing Legio Atarus. One of the foe stumbled when its foot passed over a habitation section where the gravity plates were still online, leaving it wide open to enfilading fire. To Harrtek's annoyance, Bavin did not order a retargeting, and the machine recovered for the loss of one paltry void shield.

Alarms were suddenly ringing everywhere. Servitors moaned in their alcoves.

<Debris storm. Debris Storm. Debris Storm,> they mumbled.

Harrtek forced *Nuntio Dolores*' sensorium wide. At the far edge of his detection

range, a tumbling mass of ruined metal was hurtling towards them, closing fast. The first elements were coming in already, too fast to see, punching neat, round holes in the surface of the orbital. The approach of the artificial meteor storm had been masked by the void war. It was one of thousands kicked up by the grinding siege of Theta-Garmon V, broken orbitals and dead ship pieces whirling around the gas giant at hundreds of thousands of kilometres an hour. They came raining in with murderous force, smashing up more debris to add to their swarm as they battered the orbital. Void shields on both sides pulsed with high energy impact splash patterns.

Atarus moved in for the kill under the cover of the storm, targeting god-engines being stripped of their shields. A chunk of annihilated orbital slammed down directly on one of the Firebrands, smashing its void shields out and punching it flat into the metal. The impact wrinkled up the surrounding area as if it were ripples on water, and the maniple mates of the dead Titan were sent staggering. One fell. Another was turned about. Obstructions around Vulpa's position broke up their coherency, but the meteor fall did the same to Atarus. Electromagnetic interference from the storm cut into the infosphere as easily as the meteors speared into the dead section of the station. The defence turrets went into overdrive. There were far too many pieces of debris, ranging from metal fragments to whole modules – so many they blocked out the sun as they sped overhead.

<They have timed their attacks poorly!> Bavin sent. His thought patterns were breaking up. The wider connections between the Legio's engines were failing.

<No,> thought Harrtek. <They've timed this to perfection.>

'Seventh Maniple turn about!' he yelled. 'Prepare to engage flanking force!'

Nuntio Dolores swung its left leg wide, turning its torso hard at the same time, and its right foot dug into metal as the impetus swivelled the giant war machine around. Harrtek's intuition was correct. Using the cover of the storm, four maniples of Legio Atarus had come upon them unawares. Harrtek suspected they'd dropped through the meteors. He almost respected them for that. <Enemy incoming, third quadrant.>

Already the outflankers were firing. Screaming his anger, Harrtek urged *Nuntio Dolores* into a run. The reactor burned hot with the effort of forcing the Warlord's mass into action. Cumbersome at first, the Titan built up speed, its awkward jog turning into an unstoppable charge.

Chunks of debris slammed into the orbital in a constant rain. Void shields flared with such frequency the battlescape was lost to streamers of energy. Tocsins

blurted terrified mewling beeps, and Harrtek's MIU displays were crowded with swarms of dots. A veil of shining purple light skinned rippling bubbles that encased each Titan. Hundreds of thousands of minute displacement flares prickled every shield from the impact of micro fragments. Weapons fire added to the effect, the void shields smearing plasma and las-light into glorious display.

The other maniples were slow to respond. That nearest Harrtek's was occupied with the enemy to the front. Under fire from two sides, void shields collapsed in rapid succession, exposing the vulnerable, poorly armoured rears of the great machines. The static-crazed sensorium input ceased altogether for a moment as the reactor of *Death's Monument* went critical, swamping the shields of its fellows and scooping out a shallow hemisphere from the skin of the orbital. A rush of expanding gaseous metal slammed into *Nuntio Dolores*. His outer shield collapsed, and the war engine staggered. Sparks showered from systems blown by the violent overload. Servitors moaned from their cocoons of wires.

Nuntio Dolores ran into the teeth of the enemy, its maniple brothers close behind. *Ultimate Sanction* took a series of withering hits to the front, blasting out its shields. Quick to exploit the collapse, two of the outflanking Warlords hammered the Reaver *Dust of Ages*. Its armour held, but it peeled away from the assault, its princeps Maklaren using the vox in panic, shouting about loss of atmosphere.

Durant brought *Tenebris Vindictae* close to *Nuntio Dolores*, so the Warlords were shoulder to shoulder. Proximity alarms bleated both in the MIU infoscape and within the czella. Harrtek rebuked the lesser systems for their fear, and they fell silent.

His Reavers and Warlords fell back, cutting short their runs towards the outflanking force to provide covering fire. They followed Harrtek's preference, picking on the leading Atarus engine and lambasting it with everything they had. Its shields burst quickly. The armour followed. Harrtek had a fleeting glimpse of its name and history. A roll of honour stretching back seven hundred years was cut short, and the smoking remains of the Titan fell down in ridiculous, low gravity slow motion.

<Engine kill. Engine kill. Engine–>

A spray of laser-shot lit up Harrtek's forward aspect, and the enemy loomed suddenly gigantic before him. His voids slammed into those of a rival Warlord bearing the name plate *Exultant* across its chest. Violent emissions of energy enwrapped both machines as Harrtek forced his way through the shields. The fields pressed into one another, until with a blinding flash they merged into one

bulging, squirming spheroid. *Tenebris Vindictae* plodded past the embattled pair, seeking its own prey, as Harrtek made ready to kill.

Brazen horns sang in his mind.

Exultant swung about and stepped back, trying to bring its primary weapons to bear as Harrtek raised the arioch power claw and drove forwards hard. He roared with ecstasy as the fist contacted, skidded free, then grabbed, taking hold of the enemy Titan's volcano cannon. Ignoring the many impacts rattling off his armour from *Exultant*'s defensive guns, with a mighty wrench *Nuntio Dolores* yanked the cannon free. Gas and fluids gushed out from severed feed lines. Sparks played around the stump of the arm.

The enemy machine was not down yet. It took two steady steps back, carapace and remaining arm-weapon swivelling to come to bear on *Nuntio Dolores*. Harrtek fought against his Titan's battle rage to send it to the side as a spear of light a metre wide slammed into *Nuntio Dolores*' thigh. A scatter of false pain crawled across Harrtek's own leg, so intense it threatened him with a manifestation of machinic stigmata. He bit hard against it, and some small, insignificant part of the blended man-machine tasted blood in its mouth. Victory was in his grasp.

<Fire!> he ordered.

Nothing happened.

<Fire!> he ordered again. Still nothing happened. He felt the unity of mind and machine part, fraying like cut rope. *Nuntio Dolores* was rebelling against him, pushing him out. It was raging, desperate to grapple with the machine that had wounded it. As a furious steed bucks its rider, Harrtek was cast from the Titan's embrace.

He came out gasping, a migraine splitting his brain with the force of an axe. It was all he could do not to rip out the neural shunt.

'What's happening?' shouted the moderati steersman.

'All controls are down!' shouted the primus.

The *Exultant* was drawing back for another shot. Its cannons levelled.

'Get us out of here!' shouted Harrtek.

'I can't!' responded the moderati steersman.

Nuntio Dolores was moving forwards. Without the aid of its human crew, its motions were uncoordinated. It raised its volcano cannon and fired, the shot going hopelessly wide. It built up speed, power fist raised. The Atarus machine was moving back, guns on them, matching *Nuntio Dolores* pace for pace.

The charging coils of *Exultant* glowed a dangerous blue.

'Brace!' yelled the moderati sensorius.

Exultant opened fire with all of its remaining weapons. Beams of devastating energy crashed into *Nuntio Dolores*' front. The first void shield evaporated, then the second, each failure sending lumens dancing within the czella and burning out circuits with feedback surges.

The third shield fell, brought down by a combination of the meteor storm and *Exultant*'s guns. A laser blaster beam burst through the last shield and hit *Nuntio Dolores* square where its heart would have been, if it were a man. The Titan shuddered. Secondary explosions banged off like stubber fire in the lower decks. One of the moderati screamed and clawed at his helmet.

Fire flickered inside the cabinet of a burned-out cogitator.

Exultant began powering its weapons for the final kill.

'No,' said Harrtek. 'No.'

He shut his eyes, forcing himself to ignore the situation outside, and dived deep into the manifold. *Nuntio Dolores* had been shocked into quiescence. Wasting no time, Harrtek pictured himself as a slayer of gods, and enveloped the machine-spirit in his soul.

Neural interfacing realigned. When he opened his eyes again, he was looking back out of the machine's augury arrays.

'Forwards!' screamed Harrtek.

He had no time to wait for the others to rejoin the manifold. The strain of dominating the Titan on his own threatened to burn out his mind, but he forced the machine into a headlong charge. The others rallied, their mental presences floating into the manifold and conjoining with the machine and the princeps. *Nuntio Dolores* rammed into the enemy, knocking it hard.

Their minds once more locked in total synchronisation, Harrtek, the arioch weapon's moderati and the Titan punched forwards like a pugilist in the ring. The arioch's inbuilt megabolters chewed up the metal flesh of *Nuntio Dolores*' foe, then slammed into the cockpit head.

Augur lenses burst. Half the shell of the head was annihilated. Harrtek caught a most satisfying glimpse of moderati flailing in fires fed by ruptured oxygen piping as the Titan reeled backwards, and fell into a slump. It attempted to rise, and was still, its face still burning.

<Engine kill. Engine kill. Engine kill,> the Titan's tallying system announced.

Harrtek's Titan thrust forward its mighty chin and let out a silent bellow. War-horns worked without effect in the vacuum, but the cry was heard in every other machine of the Legio Vulpa, and they responded in kind.

Stepping back from his victim, Harrtek-*Nuntio Dolores* took stock. The debris storm was racing away, taking its deadly hail with it and leaving a field of wrecked god-machines in its wake. Many were dead on both sides, small fires burning in their shells where atmospheric cyclers still worked to feed the hungry flames. Bavin's machine still stood, but was silent. No response could be drawn from the princeps seniores.

The war raged on. Harrtek came back into himself.

Atarus were gaining the upper hand. The Firebrands' charge had broken the Death Stalkers' formation, and combat had devolved into a series of one-on-one fights. This was war as fought by gladiators. Atarus outnumbered them. Enemy engines paced around those of Legio Vulpa, raking them with weapons fire from multiple angles. The outflanking manoeuvre under the cover of the storm had been unexpected, bold, and very nearly disastrous for the Death Stalkers.

There remained one last card to play.

The counter in the MIU ticked down to zero.

<All Titans!> he shouted in his mind, sending his and *Nuntio Dolores*' combined will out into the demi-Legio as an undeniable command. <Disengage sensoria now!>

Harrtek was past caring if he was obeyed or not. He shut down his own sensorium. Three terrible, sightless seconds crept by, a darkness rocked by weapons impact, while *Nuntio Dolores* bridled again at his control, and then there was light.

Somehow it penetrated through the shuttered windows. A searing luminance that outshone even the blinding glare of engine death sent wounding shards into the czella of *Nuntio Dolores*. The blades of light moved around, and passed.

<Reengage sensorium,> Harrtek commanded.

Nuntio Dolores opened its eyes.

The sun had joined their struggle. Pulsing aftershocks of radiance washed over the battlefield. The void and everything in it was lost to a haze of white. Harrtek could barely see, and these little storms were but the following waves of a stellar tsunami, a discharge of highly energised photons bullied out of Theta-Garmon by the arcane sciences of the New Mechanicum. It hurt his very being to look into the brilliance, but he could see.

Legio Atarus were blind. So too were the fleets of the Imperial Army and Navy. Many of the great ships warring in the void drifted powerless, overwhelmed by the flare's electromagnetic pulse. But fewer of the Warmaster's forces were affected. Through the backwash of interference, a coded signal burst on all

frequencies, conveyed to voidship, machine, man and all things in between.

Execute.

Harrtek grinned wolfishly behind his many masks. Behind the face of the Titan, behind the collar of brass, behind the stretched facsimile of humanity he wore on his face, something savage snarled.

He singled out a staggering Reaver Titan in Atarus' gold, red and black, and moved in to attack.

Slaughter was upon the Firebrands, Harrtek at the fore.

TWENTY-ONE

An Offer Re-evaluated

Three days passed as Harrtek wrestled with his decision. During that time his headache tortured him to the point of madness. It was a pain he would have gladly endured, if it would bring him back the mastery of his war machine. The moment *Nuntio Dolores* had slipped free of his guidance tormented him. First, accusations of cowardice, now this. He didn't think the lapse had been noticed, but if it happened once it could happen again. He would be finished.

In the end he could see no other way. He had to approach the magos.

Ardim Protos made his lair in the bowels of the Gardoman Hub, past the sectors set aside for his black-clad brethren, beyond the furthest reach of life support. When Protos refused his summons but offered instead an invitation, Harrtek set out prepared. One glance at the map printed on the flimsy told him he should be. Sections of the hub around the magos' home were lacking air, gravity or warmth. The route passed through several ruinous halls, so on his back Harrtek bore an air flask, and under his arm he carried his war helm. Cuff seals proofed his uniform battlesuit against vacuum. A heated under-tunic would keep him alive. He looked as if he were planning a jaunt into open space, and to all intents he was, so he ignored the looks from the menials as he trudged down level after level. He took stairwells and spiral ways in preference to lifters.

'This is a penance,' he reminded himself, as he set foot upon the nineteenth stairway.

Many more were to come.

There was a particular beauty to be found in the deep places of the hub. Frozen falls of water and waste joined floors to ceilings. Collages of bodies decorated ruptured decks, glued together by atmosphere frost in blued artworks that evoked the suffering of man. Harrtek paused by many of these marvels only briefly, but one made him stop for several minutes.

A companionway led him through one lightless hall into another much the same. The walk had become separated from the wall in the second, and spiralled down in rickety loops towards the bottom where it was, incredibly, still attached. There was no air in that place. The wall was breached by a diagonal slash four hundred metres long, the legacy of a lance hit that had played mercilessly down the hub's outer fabric. Through the blackened gap, crowded with spheres of boiled-off metal solidified again in the chill of the void, the atmosphere of Theta-Garmon V was visible.

The planet filled the gash from end to end with a jade landscape of shifting storms, grinding against each other in swirling, interlocked laminar bands, each one a different shade of brilliant green. What entranced Harrtek was not this natural wonder, but the effect of the war upon it. Brilliant splashes burst over the atmosphere as debris rained down from the shattered orbitals around the planet.

No artifice of man was mighty enough to truly entrap a world the size of Theta-Garmon V. A body like Iridium might be caged in industry, but the gas giant was too large to be shackled for long. For millennia, humanity had bled off its hydrogen and had made not the slightest impact upon its being. Men were ticks on worlds of that size. Now, the host had noticed them, and scratched. A bombardment of stupendous scale fell onto the world, dragged there by Theta-Garmon V's massive gravity well. Orbitals, ships, stray munitions, clouds of ice, bodies, everything was sucked into the planetary body. It was relentless, merciless, a revenge beyond the comprehension of the little creatures who scurried so earnestly about the galaxy.

'Beautiful,' said Harrtek. His voice was breathy in his helm. It was not designed for extended void operations, and condensation fogged the armourglass, but he stayed there awhile, watching the patterns of golden circles form, link, and disappear, as all man's art was swallowed by the indomitable might of the gas giant.

He resumed his journey only when the spin of the hub took away the vista, and presented him instead with the blankness of near-planetary space.

Protos was expecting him, of course. Harrtek emerged through jets of

decontamination gases into the laboratory of a meticulous madman.

There were many models. He remembered that later. Small scale reproductions of Titans shot through with pulsing organic growths. They were no bigger than human babies, and not particularly finely made. He dismissed them and did not understand their significance, not until it was far too late.

A flicker of lights informed Harrtek it was safe to remove his helm. He did not trust the signals, but did so anyway. There was a difference in pressure. His air supply was of higher density and gushed out vigorously into Protos' laboratory. Only when equalised did the hot stink of Protos' lair rush in to take its place: metal heated by electricity, spoiling meat and a thousand chemical acridities.

Protos descended from the ceiling, mechadendrites spread behind his back like the additional arms of heathen gods, cloak billowing, blurting binharic cant that made Harrtek's head thrum painfully.

'Theatrical bastard,' the princeps said. He spat on the floor only partly for effect; the taste of the air was coating his throat with an unpleasant film. 'You didn't make this easy for me.'

Protos came to a halt a metre over the floor. He pressed his metal hands together in a mockery of prayer, their purely mechanical nature a clashing contrast with his smooth-skinned, old man's face, which currently wore the singularly most patronising expression Harrtek had ever seen.

'On the contrary, I made it very easy for you.' Protos' robe moved in a way suggestive of a shrug performed without shoulders. 'I was rebuffed. It is now required that you prove yourself.'

'You know why I came?'

'Why else would you seek me out? You thought to summon me.' Protos shook his head slowly, his smile avuncular as he admonished Harrtek. 'I am not summoned. We, the eight magi of Sota Nul, go where we please. The likes of you make requests of me, princeps majoris.' He hovered lower to the floor. 'You want the power I offer? On your knees.'

Harrtek pulled a face, but knelt. 'Oh great and powerful machine priest,' he said sarcastically. 'Grant me the power you offered to me before, and which I so rudely rejected.'

'That is not good enough,' said Protos.

'You know what?' said Harrtek, clambering back up to his feet. 'I don't care. You came to me for a reason. You did not simply select me at random. You wanted me in particular. I'm here. It is your turn to take it or leave it, adept.'

'And why do you want what I have to offer?' Protos hovered forwards, hands

clasped now like a merchant about to close a favourable deal.

'Because I want power. I fought with Atarus today, and they nearly won. I don't want that to happen again, or this war will never end.'

Protos laughed. 'If that were the only reason you were here, then you would have accepted before. I offered you the certainty of victory, and you rebuffed me.'

'Then I seek the holy synthesis of man and machine you also offered,' said Harrtek.

'Wrong!' said Ardim Protos with sudden anger. 'Your control left you, didn't it? Don't lie to me. I reviewed your data capture after the battle. *Nuntio Dolores* nearly threw you out.' He sniggered, a juvenile noise coming from one so old and supposedly wise. 'This is the problem with your order's creed. You are aware of the physical infirmities your quest for total union places upon you. Well, it is damaging to the MIU and the Titan too. You cannot have what you so desire by normal means, you foolish, vain creature. The attainment of total unity is like approaching the speed of light in the materium – the closer one is to one's goal, the harder it becomes, until it is impossible.'

Harrtek looked up at the magos ruefully. 'If I told you you were right?'

'Then I would be pleased, because all of my kind like to be right. That satisfies me. I will do what you wish. Are you brave, and devoted to your gods, and sure of purpose?'

'There are choice words I could use here, but I'll refrain,' said Harrtek. 'You know I am all those things and more. Give me what I want. Give me mastery over my machine enjoyed by no man before. Give me back control.'

Protos smiled. 'Oh, my dear princeps, I can give you far more than that.'

TWENTY-TWO

The Ritual

The door opened, banishing the dark and casting a painful blade of light across Harrtek's face. He squinted against it. Once again, there was a figure silhouetted in the door. The princeps' life had adopted a new rhythm.

'It is time, princeps,' the figure said.

The man who came for him was not one Terent Harrtek recognised. He had the short stature of a lower-class man, and though his clothes were rich they had obviously been provided to him by someone of means.

He was cloaked from head to toe in dark red robes cinched about his waist by a belt of brass chain. Ridiculous cult affectations, Harrtek thought. The man was probably no higher than a duluz, one of the Legio peons. The lowly were always the first to tread easy roads to power. He would get none, of course. If he were lucky, he might not suffer too much as he was used to fulfil some greater man's goals.

Harrtek wondered how many civilisations had been toppled at the hands of the unwitting poor. Naturally, it always happened for the benefit of powerful men. The poor were levers to be pulled, their sacrifices shifting the positions of influence about, but nothing really changed, not in the long run. The Emperor on Terra was living proof of that. Humanity was a race with a fatal addiction to tyrants.

The thing about the oppressed, thought Harrtek, is that they remain oppressed no matter what they do. It is their role in life. Far better, he thought, if they

accepted their allotted station and did not struggle against it.

Terent Harrtek was a powerful man. He would still be powerful after this ritual. This pompous fellow, enjoying a few crumbs of influence with his theatrics and his silly costume, would gain precisely nothing from it except a sense of misguided self-importance.

All things have their place and time, he reminded himself. Rituals required certain elements, jumped-up peasants in smocks included. Harrtek kept his thoughts to himself, and tried to banish contempt from his voice when he got up from his bed and spoke the words he had been told to speak. He just about managed the tone of seriousness expected.

'I am ready.'

The man bowed low and gestured with a velvet-gloved hand. The material was black, his middle finger ringed with a piece of cheap jewellery displaying the rune of the war god. Harrtek rolled his eyes towards the ceiling.

'Show respect, my lord,' said the man in a hissing whisper. Harrtek frowned. The man had been looking at the floor. How had he seen?

'I am nervous. I am sorry.'

'You should be nervous,' said the man. There was a gloating edge to what he said that Harrtek did not care for.

'Lead on,' Harrtek said.

The man bobbed his head again, then turned. Harrtek followed.

He had been told to go bare-chested and barefoot, so he had. His combat fatigues were a jumpsuit, so he wore his dress uniform trousers instead, leaving him feeling simultaneously over– and underdressed. The deck was cold under his feet. Draughts of recycled air stirred the hair on his chest. He hadn't truly appreciated how cold it was on the station. It should have been warmer. Often, over-heating was a problem in void installations, with vacuum being a fine insulator, but the place was frigid. He tried to think if it was always that cold, but somehow, he couldn't. He experienced the first shiver of unease deep in his gut.

'Is it just me, or has it got colder?' he asked.

'Silence,' said the man with a backwards glance. 'If you must be distracted, meditate on the might of the god of war.'

The experience was preposterous, but it appeared the whole hub had bought into the performance. The station corridors were deserted but brightly lit. The ever-present machine song of life support systems hummed away in the background. He did not feel like he was about to undertake a sacred ceremony. Rather he was reminded of the childish initiation rituals he had been forced to

undergo at the Legio scholastica at the hands of the other pupils.

On the route he saw no other people. They went a way Harrtek had never been before, and soon he was lost, though he prided himself on his sense of direction. A heaviness overcame his thoughts, and he heard again the far-off blare of brazen horns. The sound had come to him many times, although never so clearly as then. It was distant as always, but for the first time he was sure he heard it, rather than imagined it. He stopped and looked about.

'Did you hear that?' he asked.

The man chuckled. There was something not quite right about his voice, Harrtek decided. It was too… wet.

'He is calling to you. Khorne, the lord of skulls.'

Harrtek's stomach clenched. In the Legio they rarely said the god's name. He was not superstitious, but hearing it aloud frightened him, and he did not scare easily.

'You heard it too?' he said agitatedly.

'Come,' said the man. 'We have a way to go.'

He was led into service conduits so crammed with piping there was hardly room for a man to pass. Smooth plating gave way to grillwork that bit into his feet. It got colder all the time, and his misgivings grew.

The sense of unreality only increased. Hidden in the humming workings of the hub, Harrtek heard the blasts of horns seven more times, though these subsequent soundings teased him, staying right on the edge of hearing. The man began to mutter to himself, nasty words with sharp edges and wounding sounds. It got colder yet. Harrtek's feet became numb. His blood flowed sluggishly, each heartbeat a congested thump in his sinuses.

Presently they came to a door so mundane in appearance Harrtek almost laughed with relief when the man stopped beside it, and with exaggerated solemnity gestured at its chipped, hazard-striped metal.

'The portal to a new life,' he said portentously. 'Are you ready?'

The sound of liquids moving through the pipes, the humming of poor-quality lumen globes in the light fittings, the grumbled and short-lived whines and bangs of lifter mechanisms, all conspired to undermine the moment. Some of Harrtek's self-assuredness returned. And yet, the worm of fear continued to thread its way around his guts.

'I am,' said Harrtek.

'Then enter.'

A solitary green lumen above the door switched on. The chipped door moved

aside very slowly. Harrtek's breath caught in expectation of what he might see beyond.

When the room was revealed, Harrtek nearly laughed again. The chamber beyond was a simple, octagonal robing room for duluz working in hazardous environs. A second door faced the one Harrtek stood in, and a single bench ran round every facet save those pierced by the doors. Hooks were attached to the walls in sets of four above the bench, and from them hung heavy plasticised suits with integral gauntlets and boots. They hung like deflated men, their cylindrical head pieces bowed by the weight of the visors each sported. Seven of his fellow princeps stood within, all naked to the waist and bootless like himself, all shivering. They were each accompanied by an attendant like Harrtek's. The only thing out of the ordinary in this scene was a large brass pot heating over a portable coil in the dead centre of the room. Vapours rose from it, carrying with them the scent of blood.

'What are we doing?' Harrtek said. The others looked at him. They displayed a variety of emotions. They were princeps, so none exhibited fear, though one or two certainly felt trepidation. The others were scornful of his lack of respect, all save Peshin Clenn of Maniple Five, who shared Harrtek's uneasy contempt.

'We can begin,' said one of the other attendants. Harrtek knew that voice.

'Casson?' said Harrtek.

Harrtek's own guide pushed him against the sole vacant facet of the room.

'Unhand me!' he growled, catching the fellow about the wrist. His arm was thin, weak.

'You are to do as we command,' said the man who was almost certainly Casson. 'You will stand where I say.'

Harrtek looked to his fellows. He was the only princeps majoris in the room, and by extension the one voted most often to serve as princeps seniores within the group. He was their leader. They watched him carefully to see what he would do.

He gave a smile that was mostly false bravado, and cast the man's hand aside roughly. 'Very well!' he said, holding up his arms. 'Very well! Have at it, Casson – perform your task. Though if I had known you were involved in this foolishness you would not have remained in my employ. This is a version of the blooding, yes? A ritual I have undergone many times. Get on with it.'

Casson faced him. Black bandages around his face provided the sense of depthless shadow within the hood; it was a cheap trick, but even so there was something inhuman about his eyes. 'This one shows bravery when he is scared,'

Casson said to his fellows. ‘They are all scared, these mighty warriors.’ He gloated now. ‘Do not listen to them. They shame themselves in the eyes of the Blood God. We have work ahead to make them worthy.’

‘How dare–’

‘Silence!’ said Casson. ‘I have done much to prepare you for this moment, though you did not see. I will not have you spoil it. Mark them. Make them ready.’

There was an undertone to Casson’s words that killed Harrtek’s outrage dead. He lowered his hands. Paintbrushes were lifted from the pot and moved to the princeps’ skin, dripping red upon the floor. The warm marks they drew over Harrtek’s body did nothing to dispel the cold. He watched his servant, the leader of the cultists. Though he was dressed identically to the others, he assuredly was in charge, the princeps to this gaggle of moderati. His influence on them was subtle. Casson hardly spoke to the others, but he exuded an air of ready violence, and they shied from him when he came near.

I never knew he had it in him, thought Harrtek.

Warm blood ran over Harrtek’s body from the sigils they painted. It dried quickly, pulling his skin taut, until his entire body was covered with patterns of itching tightness. The acolytes worked in silence. The delicate movement of the brush relaxed him, and he was lulled into a meditative state. Beneath the calm a fury stirred, reminiscent of the machine-spirit of *Nuntio Dolores*, although far bigger, an infinity of endless, bloodthirsty rage. It called to him with wordless roars and the blaring of brass horns.

‘We are done,’ said Casson.

Harrtek’s eyelids opened, cracking the crust of blood painted over them. He felt like he had been sleeping standing up, though he did not remember falling asleep or even shutting his eyes. The room was shifting, stretching, like shimmering air over sun-baked mudflats or an overheated engine vent.

‘Follow.’ Casson beckoned over his shoulder. The acolytes lined the princeps up. All were as dazed as Harrtek, some more so. There was a febrile light in their eyes. One of them – Bassack, Harrtek thought – was jittery, hands clenching, mouth working, a man on the edge of violent outburst.

Why couldn’t he tell who this man was? Was it Bassack? He knew them all, but he didn’t know them at all. He couldn’t recognise them. His thoughts weren’t his own. He felt drugged – no, that was wrong. Was he? He was intoxicated by anger. He wanted to fight.

‘The way is open, open the way. The door parts to the eightfold path,’ sang the

chief acolyte. His voice was no longer Casson's.

Such a pompous thing to say to a door in a room of such mundane purpose. Then the door opened, and it did not seem so foolish any more.

Hard orange light flooded the room. Furnace blast roared in. The shock of the heat after the cold came close to flooring Harrtek. The air was so hot when he breathed that it seemed too thick to pass into his lungs. He choked. The scent of hot iron and brass was all pervasive. It was like drowning in blood. A giant chamber lay beyond, surprising in its size, and full of diabolical industry.

Drums boomed in aggressive, arrhythmic contest.

'Onwards!' said the cult leader. One by one, they were led into the orange light, and a scene of unreality unfolded before him.

Dominating the hall were eight Warlord Titans arrayed around a giant octed graven into the floor. The symbol had been cut half a metre deep into the decking, shearing through wiring and pipes under the plating with a precise, neat carelessness for their function. The Titans stood inactive at the points of the octed. They did not appear to have been tampered with, but in the volcanic atmosphere they radiated a sense of divine potency that Harrtek was sure owed nothing whatsoever to the Machine-God. From one wall *Nuntio Dolores* stared at him with hungry eyes, like a trusted animal companion gone wild.

Harrtek and the others were led to posts set between the feet of each Titan, from which dangled chains of blackened metal. Scratches in the soot coating them showed a pale gold, suggesting they were of brass.

The drums were the discharge of giant guns. They were the pounding of axes on shields. They were rocks smashing into skulls.

Harrtek let himself be chained to the post between *Nuntio Dolores*' legs. With a curious sense of detachment, he wondered why he did not resist, but by the time the sluggish thought had wound itself through the folds of his brain, he was held fast, arms crossed above his head.

Nuntio Dolores' torso projected over him, its massive chin a boulder held in place by some tenuous force on the edge of breaking. Its weapons framed the hall in a murderer's embrace.

What purpose the room had before was difficult to say with any certainty. It was vast, its ceiling lost in a confusion of pipes and smoke, and that suggested an assembly yard or manufactorum for larger components of Gardoman Hub's output. It could have been a foundry, or a smeltery. But though it was equipped with eight giant crucibles of molten metal so hot they glowed orange, they

seemed too primitive to have been used in the making of void craft. They were crude things, the tools of steam engineers, fired by mounds of coals and mounted on cast iron carts on iron rails. Huge banners so caked in gore their designs were invisible shifted in the updrafts coming off the liquid. Small figures moved everywhere between giant machines. Many were clad in the black of the New Mechanicum, but the majority were in the blood-purple robes of cult acolytes, and their number only seemed to increase as Harrtek drifted in and out of the moment.

How did it come to this? thought Harrtek. A moment of desperate clarity settled on him when he saw the situation as it was. Once, he had fought for the Imperial Truth; now he was in thrall to a primitive cult. A profound dismay had him, then blew away, cobweb fine, as he slipped and fell into blood-warm torpor.

The promise of power beckoned. The brazen horns sang louder in his mind.

The drums thundered out their conflicted barrage. Harrtek's head pounded with every sounding, like it too were a drum, and his heart also. His eyes swam, refusing to focus, and when they did he was not sure of what he looked on. Reality smeared, flickered, was replaced by dark images of black flames and screeching monsters. He tried to blink this vision away, but it would not go. When it disappeared, and the hall returned, Apostle Vorrjuk Kraal was suddenly in the room. Perhaps Harrtek had passed out from the heat and come around. The creatures could have been some sort of drug-induced dream, for by now he was certain he had been poisoned somehow.

Some time had passed. Kraal wasn't there, then he was, dominating everything around him. He was the sole transhuman in the hall, towering over the unmodified humans and the New Mechanicum alike. Burnished armour reflected the glow of molten metal. The flames painted on his shoulder plates danced with a life of their own. A line of chained, naked slaves, painted red with blood from their shaven heads to the soles of their feet, were led towards the crucibles. They were ecstatic, wailing and singing, their eyes so wide the whites were visible from all the way across the hall.

Kraal was to perform the ritual, but not alone. Ardim Protos had also appeared from nowhere, and was working his way around the circle with a band of lesser tech-priests. They sang hard hosannas in binharic cant to the God of Blood. The air thickened. Clouds of red smoke spilled from their censers. Jabbering cyber-constructs wheeled over them like vultures, drizzling vitae from fanged maws.

It took the tech-priests an age to pass around the great circle, but in no time at all it seemed, Protos was standing in front of Harrtek. The tech-priest stopped his

procession, and approached the princeps.

Harrtek raised his head with great difficulty. It felt as if it were full of lead. Protos watched him with interest as he forced his tongue to move.

'What is this sorcery?' he asked. His words were lumpen, poorly formed, barely intelligible, but Protos understood.

'It is not sorcery, not quite. This god does not approve of magic tricks. Call it an invitation instead,' said Protos. 'All done to the most stringent scientific principles, naturally.'

Harrtek's head fell forward. Protos reached out a metal hand to steady it. The prosthetic was so hot, Harrtek's skin sizzled.

'You were the most difficult to convince. I am glad you saw sense,' he said. 'Power of unimaginable potency will soon be yours. All you must do is bear a little pain.'

Harrtek tried to speak, but his words would not form in his brain, let alone his mouth.

'What was done on Astagar will be done again. This time it will be better. Our two gods working in one mechanism, with but a few souls required to seal the bargain.' He let Harrtek's head drop. 'All for your benefit, of course. The gift of iron, of brass and of blood is yours. I am almost envious.'

Droning chants receded. Harrtek's mind slipped further into redness. The horns blared constantly. The ring of blades filled his ears. The next he knew he was surrounded by the thunder of drums and a massive, armoured hand gripped him by the head.

'For the glory of the pantheon undivided, we beseech you, Khorne, provide us with the might of your right arm!' More words followed. Knives flashed. The patterns on Harrtek's skin were renewed as his flesh was opened up, and his own blood overwrote the flaking vitae painted there earlier. Harrtek's body screamed, but the pain was distant, and from a far battlefield he looked on his weakness and despised it.

Time blinked. Giant machines around the hall whooped with tortured thunders. Lightning streamed upwards. Harrtek was shaking from fatigue and loss of blood. The drums reached a brief crescendo. Chanting scaled exultant heights. Kraal, now far away again, brandished his maul. It dripped with gore. Teams of sweating slaves tugged enormous chains, and the crucibles rolled to the edge of the octed, hit wedges, and toppled forwards under the force of their own momentum, pouring oceans of spitting metal into the design. The symbol acted as a giant mould. Surging waves of metal rushed down the arms, meeting in the

middle with a loud slap of liquid. Droplets burst upwards, showering over the worshippers. They screamed in holy agonies as their robes burst into flames.

Kraal dropped the head of his maul to the deck with a clang. With a perfunctory brutality the lines of slaves were shoved into the incandescent metal by the singing cultists. They toppled in neat lines, shrieking out devotions as they plunged under. They rose up, flailing, screaming for real now, human torches whose dying wails joined the chorus of insane worship.

The sacrifices were the final act. From high above, a furious voice roared, coming closer rapidly as if falling from a far-off heaven. Composed of inchoate sounds, the roaring was nevertheless possessed of sentience, and raged against its summoning. Another howling voice joined it, followed by a third, and fourth, until eight bellowing demigods joined the choirs of humans screaming out their dedication to the god of blood and war.

The roaring descended until it drowned out all else, but Harrtek saw nothing. Red lightning sheeted across the hall. Something heavy impacted on *Nuntio Dolores*, and the machine sagged with the blow. Burning heat blasted from the Titan, immolating the banners arranged behind it. One by one the other roars cut out and the Titans were bowed by invisible impacts. The shouting, drumming, blaring, singing praise of Khorne lost its final pretence at musicality, breaking apart into a discordant cacophony of screams and shouts. Worshippers turned upon one another. Knives flashed. Blood hissed on the cooling octed.

Harrtek's body filled with uncontrollable anger. His muscles swelled. His thoughts fled. Yanking against the chains that bound him until his wrists wept blood, he howled, and in a new, daemonic voice, *Nuntio Dolores* howled with him.

PART THREE

THE TITANDEATH

TWENTY-THREE

Machine Dreams

There was wind upon her skin.

The breeze was forge hot. From distant prairies of burnished brass came the scent of burned oil and heated metal. Her hair was a frizz of swarf that rattled in the breeze. Sharp and unsettling metal trees stretched down to plains of copper plates. Tiny metallic beasts ran through sharp steel grasses. Iron birds clattered in a yellow sky. In the forest, chimney pines trailed black smokes that caught upon high thermals, where they wound together in double helices before smudging into a pall that smeared the light of sun into orange, lemon, and rich pollutant brown. Her body burned with a heat that was inimical to human life. Her heartbeat was a single moment drawn out forever, an inferno blaze with no sound, no pulse. When she uncurled her fists, her fingers were guns. Her feet were spread claws. Her eyes were glass.

Children made of plasteel alloys crowded her legs, their undeveloped cannon-arms reaching up for her, pleading for attention she could not spare. She ignored them. She had so many children she did not know their names. Their squealing war-horns went unanswered. Her nervous oculi fixed on the distant place where metal met sky. There was something wicked on the horizon, and it was coming for them all.

Movement caught her many senses: infrared, seismic, sonar, aural, radar, lidar and all the other machine blessings that were hers by birthright. Her sight was layered with many palettes waiting to be selected, each promising the revelation

of a different set of secrets. She heard sounds so deep they troubled the planet's molten core, and so high no living thing could perceive them.

The tap of hoofs upon the ferrous landscape entered into her awareness. A clockwork horse, twice life-size, galloped past. It seemed to her no bigger than a toy. She recognised it with a melancholy so deep it threatened to drown her.

'Hamaj!' When she called to it her voice was the wordless blare of a war-horn. The horse panicked. Exposed springs unwound quickly in its hindquarters, driving gears that drove pistons that slammed cast bronze legs hard into the ground. It galloped faster than any horse of flesh or blood could. It was not fast enough.

'Hamaj!' The Great Mother called. Again her voice was the earth-shaking wail of war-horns. Venting towers on the horizon spat fire in response. She forced her way through her squalling children, crushing trees to scrap. The horse fled, pores fed by syringes weeping a sweat of blood down its steaming flanks.

She bent down and uncurled her weapon fingers to trap the horse. It switched direction and she missed. Her enormous fist dented the ground.

'Hamaj!' she cried. Another blare, polyphonic and mournful, blasted across the metallic world. Her hand slammed down again, this time in front of the clockwork horse, causing it to rear. Mohana reached to catch it, bullets from her fingers tearing up the rusty soil, steam whistling from pipes in her knuckles. Wild now with panic, the clockwork steed kicked and bucked. She tried to calm it, but her words were the uniform, aggressive blare of battle music. A finger touched its rear leg, a gentle caress that was deadly to the horse's delicate mechanisms. The leg broke. A spring unwound and burst free. Tiny cogs bounced across the wrought landscape in gentle, random musicality.

The horse screamed. Its forelimbs sparked from the iron earth, but it could not rise.

'Hamaj!' she blared, and this time the horns captured something of human speech, rising and falling the way the name should, though they presented no meaningful sound.

'Mother!' the children wailed, their war-horns now the flat-toned grind of malfunctioning servitors.

She swung about, swatting them down in her clumsy immensity.

'Great Mother.' Another voice. Booming. Human. It came from the sky. She looked up. The sun had gone; a black hole replaced it. The clouds were striped with ribbons of data streaming towards oblivion. Within that void was something vast.

‘Great Mother,’ said the voice.

‘Non-functional. Synaptic disconnect. Neural network non-associable. Machine binding seventy per cent and rising.’ The second voice spoke not in words, but in the rapid pulsed screeching of lingua technis.

She remembered eyelids. They fluttered. Sensation spread from them, outlining her face in the warm bath of preservative fluid.

‘She is waking,’ said the human voice.

‘Negative,’ said the machine.

‘No, she returns!’

Mohana Mankata Vi awoke.

Mohana Mankata Vi’s dream was slow in fading. Doubled sight swam around her visual centres. The blurred, white-grey nothingness of the amnion, sticky against her eyelids, slipped over a drop-ship interior rendered in pin-sharp resolution by *Luxor Invictoria*’s augurs. The views fought with each other, neither of them finding the upper hand, leaving them both indistinct. A remote command suppressed her native vision with a painful jolt. To be so under the control of another that she could be blinded at will outraged her, and *Luxor Invictoria*, still inactive, grumbled in its sleep. There were many tech-priests on the drop-ship hangar floor, and more upon a gantry crammed with machinery whose cabling snaked up into the Titan’s head.

She looked out solely through the machine’s eyes now. The sense of her own body, never near, seemed far distant.

Magos Principia Militaris Goten Mu Kassanius resolved himself in her optical sense. The Vox Omni Machina Mal-4 Chrysophane was at his side, rising and lowering himself upon his piston legs.

‘Rarely do I see both heads of the Legio’s priesthood together. Matters must be serious.’ Mohana tried for levity. Her voice was not her own, even slightly. The emitters on the Titan’s head shouted every word without a trace of her modulation, removing any scrap of humanity.

The infospheric patterns of the magi betrayed their discomfort.

‘It is almost time,’ she said, trying vainly to keep her voice to a human level.

‘It is,’ said Goten Mu respectfully. ‘You are on the cusp of ascension. Your union with the Machine-God is not far away.’

‘I will dissipate into the manifold.’

‘You shall be the first to become one with this Titan. You will forever be a part of it,’ said the Vox Omni Machina with religious awe. ‘Your imprint will guide

those who come after. No one else will ever have this honour! There can be only one who is first.'

'I shall still be dead,' said Mohana Mankata Vi. She paused. 'I do not remember being deactivated.'

'It was an emergency precaution,' said Goten Mu. 'You suffered a severe cognitive break when you learned of Princeps Esha Ani Mohana's wounding. Do you remember? You were on the wall at Hansu. Princeps Esha Ani Mohana was ambushed.'

Another pause, filled with dread. 'Is my daughter… Does my daughter live?'

'She lives,' said Chrysophane, 'and she did you credit assuming leadership of the Legio while you were inactive, although Magos Principia Militaris Goten Mu Kassanius has been taking all strategical decisions and will continue to do so until the succession is ratified.'

'Until I am dead,' said Mohana darkly, enjoying the electric field of discomfiture spiralling around the adepts at her bluntness. 'How long have I slept?' she asked.

'Weeks, Great Mother,' said Chrysophane.

'Weeks?' she said. 'Then it is almost time.'

'It is, I regret,' said Goten Mu.

'And the war?'

'The war goes as it did,' said Goten Mu. 'Hansu Hive holds. While we maintain control, the Chymist's Sea zone is safe, and Beta-Garmon III will remain in Imperial hands. There have been several more attempts to attack from the south with enslaved regiments of Garmonites. The first took us unawares, the rest have been less successful. Engine loss is at an acceptable rate. Legio Astorum continues to repulse attacks from the traitors. Loyal forces destroyed the Iron Warriors siege battalion. Since then, the combat efficacy of our attackers has decreased by approximately twenty per cent.'

'Shall I lead my daughters one final time into battle? Or do you wake me only to bid me farewell?'

'You are combat capable,' said Goten Mu. 'While you are awake. Alas, we can no longer disconnect you completely from the MIU. If we were to attempt it, you would be subsumed into *Luxor Invictoria* for good.'

'No human can remain perpetually attached to the machine in this way,' she said. 'I am surprised you have not already sent me on my way.'

'Great Mother, your strategic insight is invaluable,' said Goten Mu.

'Do you find my daughter unworthy?'

‘She is worthy,’ said Chrysophane. ‘Continuity is important in these terrible times. We value you, that is all.’

‘And there I thought I was the inconvenient nub of flesh required to bring your idols to life,’ Mohana said. ‘I sense nothing in the Legio infosphere indicating battle approaching. The ship does not move.’ She paused, reaching further into the invisible web of data linking the Legio together. ‘We are still upon Beta-Garmon III. There is some other reason you have woken me. The question is, what?’

‘You are perceptive as ever,’ said Goten Mu with a small bow. ‘A little over a month ago, the primarchs Sanguinius and Jaghatai Khan arrived at Beta-Garmon. The Khan has committed himself to a hit and run campaign throughout the subsector. Sanguinius of the Ninth Legion has assumed control over all other Imperial forces.’

‘Has he succeeded?’ asked Mohana Mankata Vi.

‘To an extent,’ said Goten Mu. ‘You appreciate the level of disorganisation here better than most.’

‘I do,’ she said.

‘He has had some success in bringing together Imperial war efforts,’ continued the Magos Principia Militaris. ‘His vision for the campaign is taking hold. There are, however, difficulties he must contend with, not least dissension between the Titan Legios.’

‘Dissension over what?’

‘Sanguinius has commanded that the Beta-Garmon system be purged of traitors. He wishes to retake Nyrcon City as the first action in stabilising the war. If Beta-Garmon II can be returned to the Imperial fold, then Horus may be driven back to the edges of the cluster,’ said Chrysophane. ‘The Legios Titanica are split between those who wish to bring the conflict to a head and force a rapid conclusion in order to halt the attrition we have been suffering these last months, and those who wish to continue the campaign as it is. This latter group fears the scale of the attack Sanguinius proposes will result in their Legios’ destruction.’

‘You have woken me to decide what Legio Solaria’s course will be.’

‘It is not a decision I can make,’ said Magos Principia Militaris Goten Mu. ‘Not without contravening the agreement between Tigris and the Legio Solaria.’

‘Typically, you magi cannot control that which you create.’

‘With good reason,’ said the Vox Omni Machina. ‘The Legio should remain apart from the factionalism inherent to the cult.’

‘I will not transgress these sacred oaths,’ said Goten Mu. ‘What is your

decision?'

'More data,' she said.

Goten Mu's cowled head nodded at one of the tech-priests manning a station on the maintenance cradle. He inserted a mechadendrite into an interface port, and twisted.

A most audacious plan unfolded in Mohana Mankata Vi's mind.

'This is Lord Sanguinius' plan? A score of Legios, hundreds of Titans, massed together to take back Nyrcon city?'

'The third battle for the system capital will be costly in blood and oil,' continued Chrysophane. 'God-engines were not made to fight each other this way, as infantry in an army of giants. The destruction unleashed will be unprecedented. Our Legio is particularly ill-suited to this form of battle.'

Plans, maps, diagrammatical representations and more flooded Mohana's strategic senses. A scarred, ugly orb swelled in her mind. Beta-Garmon II was ancient, inhabited by mankind for tens of thousands of years, and bore the scars of careless stewardship. Sanguinius' armies had the traitors boxed into various kill zones on the planet. The greatest concentration held the capital.

'His Legion will take the Anvil,' said the Magos Principia Militaris. 'We shall storm the walls.'

As Goten Mu spoke, specifications of the city defences unspooled in the Great Mother's mind. Nyrcon City's mountainous hive soared up through Beta-Garmon II's polluted skies. Its irregular base was followed with exactitude by a high, encircling wall. Graphical flourishes indicated many stretches had been repaired and enhanced by the Warmaster. The hive was heavily damaged from the previous two battles fought over it, but the wall had been strengthened with emplaced heavy guns torn from dead god-engines. Her view expanded, taking in the star fortress of the Anvil locked in geosynchronous orbit with the hive. At three hundred kilometres above the peak, from the ground it would appear as nothing but a shape among many others, it being but one of hundreds of orbitals crowding the sky. But its armament could level the city, or destroy any attacker who dared to chance the defences.

'If the primarch fails to secure the star fortress, then we shall be helpless,' said Mal-4 Chrysophane. 'We will die.'

'It is a glorious plan,' said Mohana. 'Filled with risk, but bold.'

'As to be expected from the Great Angel,' said Goten Mu.

'It is ruinous,' said Chrysophane, his machine warble becoming stridulous. 'The projected toll in machines and personnel is staggering. We risk not only a few

engines here – we risk the whole of the Legio.'

'Wars are not won through timidity,' she said. 'How many other Legios have pledged their support?'

'Of the twenty-seven in this sector of the cluster, twenty. Three are unable, four refuse.'

'You suggest, Vox Omni Machina, that we join this timid quartet?'

'I suggest prudence,' Chrysophane rejoined.

'Magos Principia Militaris Goten Mu, you are the strategist of your binary. What say you?'

'I defer to your judgement, Great Mother,' he said. 'I will gladly calculate the best disposition of Legio support troops to enable you to achieve your end, for that is the role the Machine-God has allotted to me. But I cannot and will not make this decision.'

She allowed the play of data to run through her. It reinvigorated her, fresh as cold water, bracing as the rain, but in the back of her mind she still saw metallic skies and trees of steel.

'I accept the primarch's command. But a portion of the Legio will remain here under the command of Princeps Majoris Esha Ani Mohana.'

'The number?' asked Goten Mu, glad to be relieved of the burden of decision.

'Two maniples, no more. I see the primarch requires defensive forces to be stationed around the hives of this world.'

'A precaution,' said Goten Mu. He allowed his enthusiasm for the primarch's strategy to show now he was no longer responsible for following it. 'The Season of Vitriol is on us. All non-Legio forces are reducing their operations. Only void-shielded units can operate. Caustic fogs blanket the coast day round. Alkaline squalls are building into persistent storms inland. These have been known to trouble the world for months at a time. The meteorological conditions alone provide us with a fine defence, and will last for the next half year.'

'The Warmaster has the majority of his Titans defending Nyrcon city,' said Mohana.

'Therefore he has very little offensive capability he can use on this sphere,' Goten Mu said.

She surveyed the information again. The two magi retreated from her consciousness for a time. She brought herself back before she was lost.

'Send Esha Ani Mohana and Second Maniple to join the forces guarding the Diviner's Needle. Sixth Maniple will merge with the remnants of Tenth Maniple and add to the garrison of Caldera City.'

‘As you will it, Great Mother.’ Goten Mu bowed deeply. Chrysophane less so. The Magos Principia Militaris’ infospheric profile broadcast his satisfaction. Mohana saw now that Goten Mu had been lying about his reluctance to make a decision. They had argued. Had the two been in agreement about the matter in the first place, they would never have woken her.

‘Make the rest of the Legio ready for transit to Beta-Garmon II,’ she commanded. ‘We walk for the primarch. I shall lead my daughters into the greatest and most challenging battle we have ever faced. It is fitting I should end my tenure as Great Mother this way.’

The Vox Omni Machina and the Magos Principia Militaris bowed again. A choir began to sing an exultant song of ultimate victory.

Messages passed out through the Legio telling all that the Great Mother marched to war one final time.

Beta-Garmon II was an ugly world. Though the capital of the system and the entire sub-sector, it was not the most populous – that honour belonged to Beta-Garmon III – nor was it the most culturally significant, or even the most productive. A blasted, irradiated wasteland when the great Principia Imperialis found it at the beginning of the Great Crusade, it had latterly been given over to weapons testing. Every instrument of destruction below Exterminatus grade had been unleashed upon its surface, from the humblest lasgun to the mightiest Mechanicum Ordinatus weaponry. Giant craters riddled its plains. Away from the inhabited equator in the desolation zones, destabilisation of tectonic plates had opened vast chasms. The planet’s orbits were a crowded graveyard of decommissioned hulks employed for target practice. The only orbital of any strategic worth was the Anvil.

It was a chilly, inhospitable planet, warmed unenthusiastically by the Beta-Garmon star. The population clustered around its swelling middle in enormous fortress hives, the only legacy of the Dark Ages to have survived intact. But it was upon this inhospitable orb that power had come to rest. From Beta-Garmon II, mankind had fought back against the cataclysms of the Age of Strife.

Two great battles had already been fought over the fortress hive: the first under forces despatched by Lord Dorn at the start of the war, when the Imperium had seized control from a small traitor garrison, the second when Horus’ massed armies had taken it back. And now, in the true spirit of relentless escalation, Sanguinius’ armada came to take it again.

Blood Angels fleet vessels cleared a descent corridor through the fields of

debris surrounding the world. It was slow work, hampered by the danger of void junk impact as much as by the enemy. Defence laser fire spitting up from the hive fortresses obliterated more wrecks than it did active ships, and the Anvil, whose presence alone was once a deterrent against invasion, was silent, much of its capability lost earlier in the war. Suppression strikes against the largest batteries were launched from multiple craft in the Imperial Fleet. Explosions flowered across the planet's dayside. Hives burned. The risk to civilians was paid little consideration.

From orbit the bodies of god-machines brought low earlier in the war were visible against the uniform drabness of the surface, like the bodies of crushed insects. Towards these corpses hundreds more war engines came, fresh recruits fed into the slaughter, in a desperate push reminiscent of mankind's first, bloody forays into industrialised warfare, millennia ago.

The Great Mother's drop-ship was down first among the Legio. All six drop-ships from the *Artemisia* deposited their cargoes gently upon the surface, their void shields sparkling under fire as they descended, and then again as they returned to the metal-choked anchorages of Beta-Garmon II.

Mohana Mankata Vi needed no time at all to interface fully with *Luxor Invictoria*. She slipped into its mind without making a ripple in its being, as unconsciously as an elderly human couple, long pair-bonded, might join hands as they walked. The idea of Mohana Mankata Vi was a ridiculous thing to her now. Only the Titan truly existed, her soul and its machine-spirit together, as one, though the sensation of control she had over the twain was an illusion. She was the iridescent film of oil upon a wide lake, soon to be stirred away into nothing, and lost.

For the time being, Mohana Mankata Vi remained the guiding consciousness of the god-engine. To the honking blare of alarms and the spinning of warning lumens, drop-ship wargates fore and aft swung wide. Sickly yellow daylight battled the artificial glow of the transit beacons, followed by a far more aggressive spill of fine dust. It was already drifting inside the ship by the time, only seconds later, the retaining clamps snapped open, fuelling and data lines fell away from the Titans, and Mohana Mankata Vi's myrmidons exited with practised efficiency. The Great Mother was last out, stepping into the gap behind her lead two bodyguard machines, as the others came around the drop-ship to take up position behind her, framing her in a box of plasteel and ceramite.

'My daughters, look!' she proclaimed. 'Is this not glorious?'

Through lemon-yellow skies the might of Mars' empire descended. Scores of Titan drop craft were putting down under the cover of a suppressive bombardment that shook the planet. They floated down serenely, the effortless appearance of their landing belying the immense efforts needed to keep them aloft. Gravity engines put out a constant thrumming that, when produced by such a number of vessels, created a complex web of noise that wrong-footed the senses and shook the bones. Plasma jets roared with the outrage of captive dragons. Exhaust vents glowed hot. Daggers of blue fire stabbed into the earth when the ships came into land, turning it to steaming glass that landing claws shattered as the weight of the craft sank into the earth. Titans stepped from individual drop coffins, in maniples from larger ships, and in some rare instances en masse as full demi-Legio from the maws of giant, atmospherically capable conveyors bigger than the *Artemisia* or the *Tantamon*.

There was debris upon the plain from millennia of war. Wind-scoured outcrops nearby could have been natural formations, but a cursory scan showed the reinforcement built into them; they were the pilings from long-vanished structures of which now nothing else remained. Masses of metal beneath the ground were the buried remnants of battles fought at the height of the Age of Strife, while upon the surface, already being swallowed by snaking tendrils of sand and dust, were the blackened shells of armoured vehicles, fallen voidships and Titans, all dead in the battles for Nyrcon City.

The landing zone was well out of the range of the city's artillery batteries and so far away even the void-scraping height of Nyrcon was lost to the haze choking the air. Nothing but the passage of defence laser blasts was visible – dazzling flashes in the sky, heard as the sharp rolling of artificial thunder, felt through the inconstant fall of microbeads glassed from the dusty air.

The Legio ships were under fire. Laser blasts chased them all the way down from orbit to the ground. Imperial Army and Legiones Astartes fighters raced among them, hunting down missiles aimed at the drop craft. Further out, more aircraft duelled with enemy fighters, keeping them back from the landing zone. The defence could not be flawless. There were casualties. A coffin ship fell burning through the sky, slightly too fast, outpacing its stately, undamaged fellows and breaking apart like a crumpled rations-can on impact. The doors burst outwards, and the machine inside, already dead, toppled out.

The greatest of all the Titans were the great Imperators. Of the many hundred god-engines present there were but three on the loyalist side, war machines so huge they made the mighty Warlord class seem small and pathetic. They were

too large to be landed by standard craft. Two came down in drop-ships custom built to house them. Though of differing designs, they were similar in appearance, bristling with weapons and decorated with the utmost care to glorify the machines within.

The third Imperator had no ship large enough to bear it, so instead was suspended in a web of cables and brought down by a dozen labouring freight shuttles whose engines screamed in complaint at their burden. When the Titan's feet put down, explosive bolts attached to its limbs, *akropoliz*, weapons and head blew. The cables slackened, whipped back under the shuttles, and were severed at the other end so that they fell like plummeting snakes to the sand, freeing the freight craft to ascend back into orbit.

The last Imperator down was thus the first to walk. Its movement was saluted by a growing wave of war-horn song that repeated and strengthened as the immense doors to the other Imperators' drop-ships swung wide, and they too stepped out. These machines were the gods of the god-engines, and were greeted as such. A path was cleared rapidly to the front so they might walk by and be feted: *Magna Bellifica*, *Warscorn* and *Terra's Calling*, of the Legios Astorum, Gryphonica and Osedax respectively. Whose colours they wore was irrelevant. Where they went, the Machine-God strode the universe in person.

War-horns sang different songs and different pitches for the Legios. Vox communications were disrupted by the storm and enemy action, and the melancholic calls of the machines were as much use as more sophisticated means of communication in calling units together. As the Imperators passed, the vocal salute broke up, and the Titans sang to others of their order to bring them into formation.

First Maniple's drop-ship let out a pained roaring and began to lumber into the sky, its door shutting completely only when it was a hundred metres overhead. The voids glittered in the sandstorm.

Other ships from the *Artemisia* were revealed by its departure. Five more maniples stepped out, each one reinforced by survivors of lost formations. Coffin ships disgorged more. At fifty god-engines, Legio Solaria's presence was a mighty force by the reckoning of the crusade, but having so many there was a painful reminder to Mohana Mankata Vi of what they had lost; the machines on the field accounted for most of the Legio's depleted strength.

The stressed voxcasts of landing marshals urged Mohana Mankata Vi to clear the landing zone, and she obeyed. She was walking as the last of the Legio Solaria were still putting down, leading her daughters to their muster point and a

gathering of Titans like no other before.

No lesser troops landed with the Titans. A burning wind rich with killing radioactivity and poison smokes whipped across the dead plains. Landmines took the place of blades of grass upon this world. The Titans detonated them by the hundred under each plunging footfall. Anything smaller would have been obliterated.

The landing continued as the Titans gathered. A score of liveries struggled to show themselves through mantles of accumulating sand. Blue, gold, red, green, cream, bronze, silver, white, orange… their heraldries were as glorious as any force of humanity's history.

Communications with the strategos aboard the *Red Tear* were difficult. Vox boosting cut through some of the interference and jamming, but not all. The Legios were forced to negotiate with other Legios as they walked. They did agree on an order of march surprisingly smoothly. The import of the battle was clear to them all; now was not the time to argue. Mohana Mankata Vi sent her venator maniples out to the right wing, placing them without qualm under the direction of Legio Ignis, who held that flank in force. She herself remained in the centre of the army with other myrmidon formations. They split themselves by type rather than by Legio. Axiom maniples flanked the myrmidons, then venator types sent packs of Warhounds to the fore, bending the battle line into a formation like the head of a charging bull. Between the outstretched horns, a skirmish line of Imperial Knights a thousand strong was arrayed, like footmen in front of mounted lords in a war between godly houses.

Only to a primarch's direct command would so many princeps and barons submit themselves so willingly, and then, perhaps, only to Sanguinius.

By then more ships were rising into the sky than coming in to land. Most of the Titans were on the field, then they all were. The last few drop-ships scrambled their way back into the air. The final explosions of an unfortunate, downed drop-ship sounded a starting cannonade for the army of giants, and they blared their war-horns as one.

When Mohana Mankata Vi gave the order, her voice was interwoven with those of twenty other Legio Grand Masters. 'Legio Solaria,' she said. 'Walk.'

The Titans set out towards their target, their tread shaking the earth.

Twenty kilometres closer to the city, they found their enemy waiting for them.

TWENTY-FOUR

The Quality of Angels

Sanguinius swept over the battle within the belly of a Stormbird. The port side access hatch was open, letting cold, thundering wind blast into the transit bay. The primarch stood hunched within the doorway, his hair whipping about in the airflow as he cast his keen gaze over the battle raging upon the plains. Hundreds of Titans engaged at close to point blank range. The massed formation of the first days of the battle had broken up into a knotted collection of skirmishes. Lone Titans duelled around heaps of burning war machines. Packs of Warhounds loped through storms of laser fire, relying on their speed to see them safe. Phalanxes of Warlords stood opposite one another, exchanging fire like soldiers of early black-powder cultures, doggedly holding their ground in the hope the foe would break first. Titans were never intended to fight like primitive braves. He imagined them grappling on the ground, weapons discarded, attempting to brain each other with rocks and fist.

Dozens of engines had fallen. As he watched, a circle of light burst upwards as a reactor went critical. It was bright enough to temporarily blind a mortal man, but Sanguinius stared unflinchingly at it as it grew and shrank back, winking out to leave a black, perfectly round scar upon the earth. More machines were dying with every hour.

Ahead was the reality-defying bulk of Nyrcon City. The void shields had collapsed around large parts of it, and the mountainous hive was under vicious bombardment from the fleet. Huge rents had opened in the side. Fires burned

unchecked over hundreds of levels. Its defence lasers were mercilessly targeted by the Imperial fleet, but its galleries housed thousands of artillery pieces that showered the plain with explosive scatterings of metal, and the bastions of its walls were replete with the armaments of fallen god-engines.

He watched it all with a primarch's wisdom, asking his pilots to bank one way or another so he could better examine details. He did not approve of what he saw, but war was not a matter of best circumstances. If one could choose the moment, disposition of forces and field of conflict, then there would be no war at all, he reminded himself. From a voxmitter mounted in his collar, a steady stream of reports came in from his fleet and armies. The attack on the Anvil had begun. Azkaellon had already penetrated the outer defences of the docks. Amit fought upon its voidal ramparts. The fleet saw off probing attacks from traitor flotillas. Measured by the standards of the day, the battle was going well, but the standards of the day were dire. The size of Horus' armies in the Beta-Garmon cluster had shocked him. If this had been a compliance, they would have retreated and re-evaluated their plans. They simply did not have that option.

His sons thought the situation parlous too. Raldoron stood at Sanguinius' side. There was just enough room for the equerry to see out past the gold-armoured primarch down to the battle, and he had formed his own opinion.

'This is not an optimal strategic choice,' said Raldoron, seeing something of what his genefather saw. 'There are war machines dying down there that should be on Terra. We gain nothing by committing so many Titans to this battle. We shall lose more than we need to for a city of questionable strategic value.'

Sanguinius nodded. He had been pensive for so long now his sons had ceased to question his behaviour. There was no talk of his mood changing back, or even of comparing the old Sanguinius to the new. Quiet, brooding and distracted was how they had come to recognise their lord, a tendency that had begun at Signus and grown ever since, and although he had become more centred after the events of Davin, and more resolved, he had hardly grown more joyful.

'You are correct, First Captain.' Where Raldoron needed his helm's voxmitter to be heard over the wind, Sanguinius did not. He was helmless, and spoke quietly, but his voice was heard by Raldoron and all the other Blood Angels within the ship – a touch of soul to soul that sound played no part in. 'This is the only way. The Titan Legios bicker. We hardly have control over the situation in Beta-Garmon. We lead a fragile coalition. Horus has fear and fanaticism to weld his armies together. In divisive forces, further division is the worst solution. Here, together, the Legios have purpose, and share risk equally. This strategy

serves more than tactical needs, but addresses the exigencies of morale, and politics.'

Raldoron made a dismissive noise that his golden helm amplified.

Sanguinius glanced at him, before returning his attention to the battlefield. 'I know well your dislike for politics, but although you were made for war, you are wise enough to know that war itself is only an extension of the political, and a civil war is the most political of all kinds.'

'Was it politics, my lord, that brought about this ruination? I thought it treachery.'

'It was,' said Sanguinius, choosing to ignore Raldoron's challenging tone. 'Though the politics of gods, it was politics still. Lord Dorn was right to send the bulk of the Titan Legios here. Can you imagine this carnage upon the surface of Terra? It is better that they fight and die here than extinguish each other before the palace. There would be precious little left if the whole of the Collegia Titanica were to settle its differences within sight of my father.'

'These engines were always over-mighty. Did you not ever question the concentration of such power in the hands of the Mechanicum?'

'Politics,' said Sanguinius sadly. 'You are a Space Marine. You are the killers of men – they are the shatterers of worlds. Each thing has its place.' He paused. 'But you think them ill disciplined, and that they might be more effectively employed.'

'Yes, my lord,' admitted Raldoron.

'That is so, but do not blame them. These Legios are fractious only because they wish to survive. They too have their brotherhoods and their bonds. They look upon the prospect of a battle of this kind, and they see their order's annihilation. They, like we, do not care for their own lives. They are faithful, worthy, and mightier than most men of any sort, but they are still men and women, and need to be treated as such. They accept gladly their own loss, or even the loss of all of their kind, but no one can easily sacrifice themselves while others are left unscathed. Not one of them would have agreed to commit themselves fully if their peers were given other duties. This is a fight of so great a magnitude, an extinction of machines, it undermines their discipline and their sense of duty.'

'You say they are strong. The god-engines are, but their weakness is human.'

'There is weakness in all the works of men. Yourself and myself included!' said Sanguinius, rousing a little. 'Neither you nor I would gladly sacrifice our own Legion for another without firm cause, and if asked to lay down our lives to the

last Space Marine while our brothers in other Legions were kept to one side, we too would deem it unfair and cruel.' He looked out over the wrecked plains. 'That kind of thoughtlessness helped us into this hell. Would Perturabo have turned if his Legion had been shown a little more consideration? Would Mortarion, if his ego had been paid a touch more care? Curze too would have been capable of less harm had his madness been addressed, and it should have been. But it was not. We were made to be the lords of men. Our father trusted us too much to solve our own problems, and we fell so far short of his vision.'

Raldoron was shocked by his father's insights, and would have deemed them close to treasonous if they had not been uttered in so measured a way, or by so perfect a being. Sanguinius saw this, as he saw Raldoron's unswerving loyalty, and his love. It pained the primarch to know that Raldoron and many of the others would have followed him into damnation if he had chosen the other path presented him. That his Legion marched so faithfully towards a different sort of hell sickened Sanguinius, but there was no other way.

'We followed the Emperor's lead, my lord,' said Raldoron.

'Look not to the Emperor and expect perfection. My father is mighty, and good, and wise, but He is a man. Nobody is infallible. Such false faith gave us certainty when there was none.'

'Then perhaps He should have discouraged our faith,' said Raldoron.

'He tried,' said Sanguinius. He looked to the sky. The sun was a smear in the yellow, against which attack-craft warred like moths battering against a curtained casement deep in the night. He smiled with bitter, inner knowledge. 'Hubris is a trap for us all – that is the last certainty when all others are gone. There are no more certainties in this galaxy, my son. Only hubris, and only war.'

'This is a better war than most.'

'It is one we need to fight. These armies that flock to the system, they might follow Guilliman, but he is not here, and would they obey the Lion, Russ, or the Khan, or even Dorn? I have to be here. This is my place, for now. I will not say it is my destiny, for I defy the concept, but it is my rightful role, and I choose it without qualm.'

He stirred, remembering similar words spoken by his brother, Leman Russ, not so long ago. Where was the Great Wolf now? he wondered. Perhaps he was dead. No word had come from him or his Legion since he had left to face Horus. Were they all doomed to that same mistake? Both he and Russ believed fighting the Warmaster to be their fate.

His wings flexed. The movement was a wordless signal to his Sanguinary

Guard, who took the ornaments looped over his wings' wrists and handed the primarch his golden helm in preparation for flight.

'While the majority of my brother's Titans are here, we can press him elsewhere. The Khan's Ordu wounds his armies, bleeding him with a thousand tulwar cuts. Horus is not here, but we can hurt him. We shall retake Nyrcon City, and this world, and so stabilise the front. The more time Horus expends in fighting us in the cluster, the more likely our ultimate victory becomes.' He held out his right hand. The *Blade Encarmine* was presented to him, and he clasped its hilt. Into his left he took the glorious *Spear of Telesto*. 'The battle for the Anvil goes to plan. Azkaellon and Amit will deliver the star fortress unto me. We shall take this city.' He turned from the side door and marched through the transit hold. Sanguinary Guard stood as he passed, their artificial wings unfolding in readiness to follow the primarch.

'Open the rear ramp,' Raldoron ordered. The side door closed. The ship tilted as the pilots adjusted to the change in airflow, then again as the rear ramp, large enough for a tank to drive down, was pushed wide by gleaming pistons. Sanguinius walked to the very edge and stared down at the maelstrom, his wings slightly spread to help him maintain his balance. There was never a time when the primarch did not have poise. He was perfection itself, incarnated in human form.

'Time to show our hand.' He searched the ground from the open ramp, post-human vision scouring the battlefield for a place to make his appearance. Sanguinius understood almost as well as Fulgrim that there was an element of theatre to war. 'War is art. One must make a statement with it, or it cannot be called art at all.' A conflict caught his eye, a fight within the wider fight of surpassing majesty. 'There.' He pointed his sword to where a pair of Imperators faced off against one another, dozens of Titans of varying sorts in support, like kings attended by their knights, or the pieces upon a regicide board. Their liveries were caked in brown dust, dulling the colours, and yet, though all involved were made to the same plan, by the same science, there was no mistaking which side each Titan belonged to. The way they moved was different. Traitors strutted. Those loyal to Terra moved with a machine's solidity, less fluid perhaps, but purer in motion.

'That Titan bears the mark-class Imperator in honour of my father. It is a disgrace to his name. Its personal designation is *Axis Mundi*, as if Horus' plans for humanity will be the axis around which the universe shall spin. It will not be so. Both names are insults. It will fall by my hand.' Through the distortions of

his helm's voxmitter, his voice was still beautiful.

'My lord, it is not wise,' said Raldoron. 'The machine will shoot you down from the sky. It is too great a threat.'

'That is why it must die. A mark, a sign, a show of Imperial strength. My traitor brothers put so much store in omens. I will give them a sign they can easily read.'

At Sanguinius' order, half a dozen other Stormbirds flew into formation with his own. Shrapnel burst all around them as the city sought to down the primarch, but not one was touched. Still in formation, they banked around and swooped down at their target. The towers upon the Imperator's back opened fire, streaking the air with las and shell, but the void shields of the gunships held, and they stooped like hawks upon their prey, their engines shrieking. 'Put down with the others where you might do some good,' said Sanguinius to Raldoron. 'The ramparts, perhaps. I leave the decision to you, First Captain.'

'You cannot, my lord,' said Raldoron.

The engines screamed louder and louder. Explosions boomed around the ship. The void shields reacted with curlicued patterns of energy, and a smell of sweetness too close to rot.

Sanguinius spread his wings, and held aloft his sword and his spear. 'I can do as I will, Raldoron, without fear or caution. You forget my father's greatest gift to me. Through the foresight He gave me, I know I do not die here today.'

With those words, he fell backwards out of the Stormbird, turned, and stretched out his wings.

From the ships about, dozens of gold-clad warriors leapt after their primarch into the cauldron of war.

The heavens split over the bowed backs of a thousand Titans. A sacred luminance outshone the sun. The clouds cracked, and the sky wept tears of light. A lord of angels flew down from his high palace to bring justice to the betrayers. Arms spread, wings spread and gold-limned, he swooped across the field of iron. Guns roared and barked. Machine giants wailed their terrible, belligerent songs. All was thunder and death, but none could touch him. A mighty halo grew around his head, and a curious magic worked its spell upon the field. A trick of Beta-Garmon's meagre light, or a conjuration of fatigued, machine-linked minds – however it occurred, all saw it, and those who did could never forget.

Sanguinius grew. He filled the air, swelling with otherworldly power, until his limbs encompassed all the heavens and the earth beneath, showing up the

meanness of mortal life with his perfection. For the moments the vision lasted, he seemed in truth an angel of olden legend, not sprung from gene-forge at science's command, but wrought upon the anvils of heaven by grim, loving gods to be the correction of wayward humanity.

To the princeps of the loyal Legios, he was a being of purest light, clean and invigorating, the herald of hope and peace. His sword was the bringer of regretful cuts, the precise amount delivered to bring about the end of bloodshed, then to be sheathed forever and drawn no more. In his radiance they all glimpsed anew the reason why they were fighting, forgotten by many weary and blunted hearts, and saw again the vision that had sent mankind away from its blasted home world and into the stars. Not for conquest, nor for material gain and the oppression of others for the sake of power, but to realise the grand designs of the Emperor, and bring harmony not only to mankind but to all other creatures who valued peace. Within the manifolds of their machines, not a few of them wept to be reminded of what could have been, and what had been lost.

For those he came for, the vision was dark. His panoply, spear and sword were bloody with the promise of vengeance to come. His eyes burned with furious judgement. The feathers of his wings screamed through the air, each one sounding a different accusation. To those who had fallen far from noble beginnings, he was a reminder of what they had abandoned. To those whose wickedness had threatened to overthrow them from the very beginning he seemed to speak directly, condemning them for their turpitude, and showing to them the depth of their crimes.

The battle faltered. Las-beams still struck, shells still flew. Void shields thrummed and crackled. Nothing could stop the war of men-machines; there were too many devices on board the Titans dedicated to the continuation of violence: half-minds and mental extensions that performed tasks with near autonomy. But if weapons did not fall silent and slip from slackened grips as would have been the case when war was closer and more personal, the men and women whose souls the god-machines borrowed were still affected. Awe and fear entered the hearts of them all.

The light changed, like a bright sun moving behind a cloud and casting the world back into daytime shadow. Sanguinius returned to what he was, a being created by the pinnacle of humanity's genomic arts, godlike, but not a god. A storm of missiles rushing at the traitor warlords from the wings of the Stormbirds took the vision's place, with Sanguinius and his escort of false angels at their centre.

Sanguinius folded back his wings, sending himself into a steep, rapid dive. The Imperator *Axis Mundi* grew before him. It wore a face that boldly proclaimed the sensibilities of its new masters – a skull, weeping tears of blood carved from faceted gemstones the size of a Space Marine.

Las-beams flicked blind needle-jabs. Graceful arcs of tracer bullets curved towards him. A single hit to his wing and he would fall into the broil of fire and death. There were none, though projectiles filled the space around him.

I do not die here today, he thought. Within his helm he gritted his teeth. Welters of data spread themselves over his helmplate. Most urgent to his suit cogitator was the strength of *Axis Mundi*'s void shields, and it presented the facts of this front and centre, ornamented with red runes that promised imminent disaster, with pertinent numerical details in large amber digits to prove the warnings' veracity. According to the systems of his golden plate, the void shields were still engaged, and at high levels of potency. Sanguinius was coming in too fast. He would trip their displacement reaction. If he were fortunate, he would be atomised as his being was displaced into the warp. If he were not, he would arrive there alive.

'I do not die here today,' he whispered.

The combat chatter of his Legion rattled in his ears. His sons were terse, to the point, never boasting, never jibing. They were efficient killers. The Anvil was taking too long to capture. If it were not wrested from the traitors' hands, the battle on the ground would be for nothing.

'I do not die here today,' he said again, louder.

He knew where he would die. He was going to die at the hands of his brother upon the *Vengeful Spirit*. Horus' grinning, exultant face dogged his every waking moment. The pain of his death seeped backwards down the timeline, polluting the present, hurting him now, becoming more tangible as he approached that final breath. And beyond that fateful moment, in the future, the pain grew, as his death unleashed in full the terrible twin curses locked up in his sons' geneseed.

His geneseed.

But not today, not now.

'I do not die here today!' he said. He held his sword out, point forwards. *Axis Mundi* was too mighty a being to concern itself with something as inconsequential as a primarch, and ignored him. Its defenders shot at him from the towers of the fortress akropoliz that clung to its back. The Titan concerned itself with its god-sized equals, unleashing apocalyptic weaponry at the foe machines. It carried the same armament on each upper limb, vast cannons

capable of slaying Warlords with a single shot. They spat electric blue rivers of plasma into the Imperial ranks that crackled and buzzed and beat at Sanguinius with stellar heat. When they shut off, they left broad, glowing tunnels of ionisation through the air. Every discharge was accompanied by a deafening whooping, and a shock-front of incandescent gas. Each eruption consumed thousands of litres of coolant; the waste gases whooshed out of the weapon vents ranged towards the rear, bleeding out the weapons' heat with it. Then the process began again, the individual cells in the charging coils lighting in sequence, preparing to unleash death. It fired again. The heat was near enough to singe the primarch's feathers, and when the streams shut off he was buffeted by the overpressure of a reactor detonation.

Axis Mundi deigned to see him. The head moved. The eyes on an Imperator were large enough to serve as true occuli. Tiny figures moved on the command deck behind them. The Titan might hold him in contempt, but its crew deemed him a threat. The fire coming from the fortress intensified.

'I do not die here today!' Sanguinius shouted at *Axis Mundi* in open challenge.

The Titan was ahead of him. He would be on it in seconds. Its immensity was all too apparent so close. From its bastion feet to the top of the tallest tower, it was nearly twice the height of a Warlord Titan, and much heavier. A small army was garrisoned within. Tech-thralls and skitarii lined the ramparts, adding their fire to that of emplaced guns. Bullets streaked past that tingled Sanguinius' inhuman senses with the buzz of radioactivity. The alarms of his helm were blaring at him. The void shields were visible as a thin skin of purple-blue – not quite there in a real sense, they looked out of place upon reality, like pressed flowers slipped into a book of technical blueprints. They presented great danger.

'I do not die here today!' he roared.

Missiles loosed by his gunships slammed into the void shields, together with a concentrated barrage from his ships in orbit. Lances boomed through heat-shocked air. Fire rolled around the machine. The voids gave out with squealing pops, but when the fire cleared and the last of the lances snapped off, *Axis Mundi* was unscathed. More warnings sang at him. The Titan's reactor would have the void shields online again in seconds.

Other god-engines were taking the chance to attack the unshielded Imperator. Its armour was thick. Paint blistered, metal ran, but no damage was done, and power signatures building in the reactor heart informed Sanguinius that his opportunity was limited.

'I do not die here today!'

He flew in fast, his warriors boosting their winged jumppacks to keep pace with him. He alighted on the akropoliz battlements amid a blizzard of las-light and bullets.

Then the killing began.

The cyborg warriors of the Mechanicum felt no fear. Not as the Space Marines were fearless, whose alterations and conditioning enabled them to discount the emotion, or funnel it into more productive uses, but who still experienced it, no – the cyborgs could not feel it at all. The parts of the brain responsible for this most preservative of emotions were excised or bypassed. Even if they experienced fear, most of them could be brought under the complete control of their masters at the flick of a switch, and be sent to their deaths whatever their sentiments on the matter.

Between them, the *Blade Encarmine* and the *Spear of Telesto* obliterated every warrior who came against the primarch. Gobbets of flesh spattered his battleplate. Blood sprayed up the rampart walls. Oil ran freely from the rampart guttering. Metal rang off ceramite armour. A hulking myrmidon clad in black ran from a tower doorway as Sanguinius despatched a brace of tech-thralls. He spun about and levelled the spear, its arcane energy projectors vaporising the cyborg into mist.

His sons were landing amid the wrathful bombardment of the loyal Titans, guns blazing, jets roaring, alighting on the wall-walk and the towers between eruptions of fire. They landed scrabbling on the dome of the head; they arced gracefully down onto the walkway between akropoliz and czella as god-weapons carved out scars on the Titan's thick hide. Death was around them, but they did not care. They were death. Their bolters banged death's drumbeat, each lick ending in a catastrophic crash that sundered the organic from the artificial, and rendered the question of the weakness of the flesh moot.

Sanguinius' teeth itched. An annoying whine clawed at his ears. With an otherworldly note halfway between music and a shout of triumph, the Imperator's voids sprang back into life. Most of his sons had landed, but not all. Three passed through the raised voids without harm. Two more were displaced by the warp tech defences; one vanished in a clap of orange light, the other disintegrated, a severed golden arm crashing down in front of Sanguinius, bolter emptying itself in the dead man's grip.

He paused a moment. The arm reminded him of the wound inflicted upon Azkaellon by Curze. It reminded him of all the insults inflicted on his sons by

the traitors. His anger grew. Red, strong, atavistic.

'Into the Titan! Kill them all!' he bellowed. His warriors were happy to obey, slaughtering the so-called New Mechanicum's slaves like helpless livestock and disappearing within the many portals that led inside the akropoliz. Sanguinius cast around for a swift solution the problem of *Axis Mundi*. He glanced down, to his left, to where the mighty head swung across the field seeking new victims between the sheets of fire and energy blazing off its void shields. Within his helm, Sanguinius' eyes narrowed and fixed upon his target. He turned, opened wide his wings, and leapt.

Borrowed glimpses of the chaos inside the Imperator played over Sanguinius' helmplate. He could, if he wished, view the autosenses feed of a hundred men at once, each vid image smaller than a new-born's fingernail, though perfectly clear to his Emperor-made sight. Five Sanguinary Guard followed him down to the command head; the rest fought their way into the engine. Working in twos and threes, they scoured the fortress of hostiles, then began the long descent into the machine's interior, towards its downdecks and the vulnerable mechanisms they housed.

A laudable strategy, but Sanguinius was set on a literal decapitation strike, something that would be seen, something that would be noted. As he plummeted to the head, he couched the *Spear of Telesto* under his left arm and let fly with its energy burst. How the weapon generated the pulses was unknown; it was a thing of high science, a relic of greater days, and little in the current diminished age could resist its power.

Where energy blast met the head, it disintegrated a perfectly round hole, neat as trepanation. Ceramite-plasteel alloy, honeycombed plascrete and adamantium skull plate vanished together. The gap seemed too small for the primarch's body, but he stretched his wings high over his head so that his primary feathers touched, while his feet threaded the needle's eye of the hole. From leap to blast to ingress to the command deck took two seconds, far too little time for the crew to react.

Golden boots clanged hard on deck plating. Sanguinius was moving before the ringing impact died, allowing five of his sons to follow him. Moderati started in their command thrones. Lesser servants of the neokora goggled at this avatar of vengeance come into their midst.

Their princeps was the first to react, understandably so. He stood upon an elaborate dais, encased in a full haptic harness and his blinded eye sockets

plugged directly into the great machine's senses, but still he saw.

'Bring him down!' he roared, the Titan's war-horn blare voicing his panic simultaneously.

The command czella of the Imperator was impressive, not like the cramped spaces that accommodated the crew of smaller Titans. It had many commonalities with a void ship command deck, though the architecture bore the signs of religious expression absent from those of the Emperor's forces. It was as much a temple to the living Machine-God as a control room, its systems adorned with multiple iterations of the glowering, half-cybernetic skulls of the Opus Machina. These had been defiled, the foreheads branded with the eye of Horus and the unclean octed symbol of Chaos that, though executed with great art, seemed to have a crudeness that lessened the character of the entire deck.

Myrmidons in the black of the Dark Mechanicum lurched into sudden life from sentry alcoves about the bridge's upper deck. They came for the primarch with fearless purpose. All were armed with wicked close-combat attachments sheathed in disruption fields; the potency of the Mechanicum's ranged weapons rendered them unsuitable for use in so sacred a place.

Mechanicum myrmidons were warrior-priests, dedicating their lives to the Machine-God through battle. They had four arms, or six. Their brains and remaining organs were protected by centimetres of armour plating. Every one of them had a century of practice backed up with terabytes of inloaded combat engrams. Those selected to guard the holiest of holies were the most elite, and were a match for the Sanguinary Guard.

Furious combat erupted as the two forces met. Bolts scored the air and burst on armoured walls. Disruptor fields roared as they clashed. Moderati attempted to pilot their giant charge while battle raged around them. The princeps howled imprecations. The armoured gates to the Titan's antae opened and tech-guard streamed within, raising uranium carbines and volkites against the Blood Angels. A Sanguinary Guard died, then a second. Four myrmidons fell in return. A moderati steersman slumped over his desk, his back blown out by a stray bolt. Servitors jerked in their alcoves as they were hit. The movements of the god-machine became erratic.

'The primarch, slay the primarch!' shouted the priests.

Sanguinius rose up to his full height. He cast the veil of mortality aside, giving the false prophets of the Machine-God a clear view of his full and terrifying power.

'I do not die here today!' he roared.

With the *Blade Encarmine* he cleaved a myrmidon in twain, spun around, knocked another back with a blow from his wings as he brought the *Spear of Telesto* up, levelled it, and fired.

The cone of energy burst over a Sanguinary Guard battling two myrmidons. He was preserved. The emissions of the spear would harm none of the Blood, and the Sanguinary Guard was not even staggered, but the myrmidons were shattered into scrap. The blast slammed into the princeps and consumed him also.

Having lost the lynchpin of the god-engine's neural architecture, the moderati were subjected to the full force of the Imperator's mighty soul. They began to scream.

Sanguinius was a living golden wind. His blades whirled and descended, leaving nought but ruin in their wake. The tech-guard were slain, driven back, and held in the door. The myrmidons died. The great Titan lumbered drunkenly, tipping sideways, setting the deck at an angle. Bodies and machine parts skidded over the ground.

'Finish it!' ordered Sanguinius, as he stood alone in the gate and held back the engine's frantic garrison.

Two of the five Sanguinary Guard that had come with him into the czella remained. They put up their weapons and unclasped melta flasks from their thighs. They had only one apiece, but their keen minds identified the most vulnerable parts of the machine's command systems, and they clamped the fusion charges in place there.

The moderati were screaming without drawing breath. Bright fires shot from their eye sockets as they jerked like the victims of electrocution. Alarms blared from every quarter. Panicked shouts came from deep within the god-machine.

'Evacuate,' ordered Sanguinius. Still slaughtering the skitarii coming to the door, he aimed his spear behind him, and blew out one of the great cathedral windows that served the god-engine for eyes.

The sounds of metal giants at war roared in from outside. Dust, smoke and the smell of burning filled up the czella.

'Withdraw, my sons! Withdraw!'

The two guard ran for the broken eye, jump packs igniting. They spread their metal wings, and soared away.

Sanguinius backed away from the door, killing the men-machines that spilled after him. Their fury was so great at his desecration of their temple that they threw their lives away thoughtlessly.

Step by step, he moved across the heaving deck, sword and spear spinning

about him, every move calculated to end a life. Anger that was equal to his brother Angron's, and as much a part of him as Angron's was, rose through his body, empowering his strikes, pushing his engineered reflexes to supernatural speeds.

The Titan was staggering about, hardly under control at all. Its war-horns howled the moderati's pain.

The last of the tech-guard fell. The melta bombs neared the end of their countdown.

Sanguinius strode to the broken window. Before he leapt, he looked behind him to the broken bodies tumbling over the canting deck, and the moderati thrashing in agony within their bonds.

'So shall perish all who defy the will of the Emperor, whether mortal man, or mighty engine.'

As he dropped from the window, the meltacharges blew.

A contained fusion reaction slagged the central MIU interface altar. The second burned through the power balancing relays, then sank through the molten hole it had made into the lower deck of the head.

Sanguinius was soaring through the air, mighty wing-beats carrying him upwards towards his circling Stormbird, when a secondary explosion tore off the Imperator's face. Void shields blew out in a catastrophic chain reaction. Fire pouring from its shattered neck, metal groaning, men screaming, the Titan toppled forward. Its knees bent, and its guns gouged at the earth as it kneeled. It came to a rest in a half bow, as if honouring its vanquisher.

Imperial Titans greeted the sight of the fallen traitor with a mighty fanfare.

The battle raged on.

Sanguinius attacks Axis Mundi

TWENTY-FIVE

Ill News

Gales howled around the position of the Legio Solaria. There were only the nine of them up in their mountain eyrie, Esha Ani Mohana's maniple and a handful of Titans orphaned by the destruction of their own units. Arrayed around the sides of an ancient landslip like votive statuettes placed on haphazard shelves, they rocked in the moaning wind. The gale called strange voices from the machines' limbs, leaving the crew, trapped in the claustrophobic confines of the god-engines, with the eerie feeling of a haunting. Esha listened to the voices wail. They disquieted her not at all, but the same could not be said for all her warriors.

'They are ghost voices,' said Jephenir Jehan into the sepulchral quiet of the czella. 'The lost souls of god-engines slain in the conflict have attached themselves to the living. They want the warmth of our reactors.'

'Who told you this?' said Yeha Yeha, her voice high with incredulity. They were all gloveless and helmless, waiting for a battle that might never come.

Jephenir shrugged. 'Locals,' she said, as if that explained it, though the opportunities to meet any of the world's inhabitants were so limited as to be non-existent. 'It's the Carthega Telepathica. All those witches in one place – they wear the walls of reality thin. The warp is not far away.' She glanced sidelong at the empty station of Mephani Ohana. There had been no replacement for her. What few crew the Legio had to spare came only from destroyed engines; there had been no new recruits for over a year, and the members of the Legio finding themselves bereft of a post had been sent to bolster the efforts on Beta-Garmon

II.

Mephani Ohana's communications bench had been cleaned, but it was impossible to get all the blood out under wartime conditions; the whole station needed disassembly, and there was no time for that. Bits of her clung to the machinery where she had spent so much of her life. The area around her console smelled of counterseptic that could not entirely hide the scent of blood.

Esha betrayed no sign of movement, but her attention followed Jephenir's to the dead woman's seat. Her own wounds ached as she looked upon the empty chair. Neither she nor *Domine Ex Venari* had fully recovered from the neuro-slave attack.

'What do you know about the warp?' said Yeha Yeha.

'A lot more than I did when this war started. I thought…'

'Don't think,' snapped Yeha Yeha. 'Watch. Keep your eyes open and your mind closed.'

Jephenir looked sullen. 'Yes, moderati primus,' she said.

Esha stayed out of their argument. She breathed deeply of the stale air. Jephenir had a point. There was something odd about the location. When Esha was in the machine's mind it barely affected her, but out of it she felt light-headed and hunted, as if she were being watched.

She pulled an irritated face. She was falling for the same insane superstitions ripping through the Imperial side, talk of ghosts and daemons and wicked things living on the other side of thought. Hers were wars of steel and fire, not magic. The things that swam in the empyrean were real, objectively so, but though nightmarish, they were also real enough to kill. They were just an exotic form of xeno-organism, that was all, and therefore worthy of contempt.

The wind blew hard in challenge of her thoughts, screaming outrage through the cabling of the Titan. The princeps shifted her eyes to one of the brightest points in the head, a bank of small notification lights that flickered lazily with each of the more powerful gusts. The storm's rain was laden with corrosive salts blasted up from the dead plains. Omega-6 had modulated the void shields to keep the worst of it out, but voids were poor protection against so feeble a force as the wind. Most of it got through along with its caustic cargo, and the alkalis were slowly but surely eating their way into *Domine Ex Venari*'s body.

It would take centuries to compromise the Titan's armour plating, but the cabling was vulnerable. Though hyper-plastek and banded plasteel protected the large pipes leading to the weapons and the major joints, they had large surface areas, and many joins whose seals would not hold up forever. The hydraulics

would be all right for weeks, she thought, but maybe not the electrical cabling, fine as it was and so diffusely spread throughout the giant machine. The lights showed the status of the motive-force current through wires ranging from man-thick to hair-thin. Green for hale insulation. Amber for minor, intermittent shorts. Red for short-circuited. Of the dozens of little lumens, a handful were green. A lot flickered between green and amber. None, as yet, were red.

She squeezed the armrests of her command throne beside the never-used manual controls. There were little dimples from the many times she had done it before, always when waiting for battle. Years of her frustrations had left saggy areas in the leather, topped with white half-moon scars where her nails had pressed.

On an impulse, she depressed the vox switch by the motivator throttle on her left armrest.

'Maniple, announce yourselves,' she said. She was not linked into the machine. *Domine Ex Venari* slept through the storm, facing into the rain like an agricola bovid. Esha Ani Mohana relied purely on the vox to communicate, technology aeons old used by the humblest soldiers of the Imperium.

Her Titans responded in order of hierarchy. Her maniple first, then the strays attached to her command. With each princeps she held a short conversation. Little was to be said beyond matters of lights blinking from green to amber, and voices on the wind. They were all as bored and tense as she was. As Esha held her brief conference, Jephenir whispered a request for permission to leave the czella to Yeha Yeha, who granted it. She came back before Esha's roll call was finished, bearing mugs of scalding recaff for them all. They sat in silence, sipping the overheated liquid. A plasma reactor was useful for many things, but harnessing its exhaust to do something as simple as boil water for beverages required a certain level of skill. They were natural hunters all, but additional training was required for the crew before they were let loose on the atrium kettle.

Without access to *Domine Ex Venari*'s senses, and the small window over the augur lenses of the eyes shuttered against the storm, Esha relied on the czella's internal screen for a view to the outside. When the last princeps voice clicked away, she stared at it. From where they were stationed they had a good view of the Carthega Telepathica's base. The scale of the structure amplified the feelings of otherworldly power that surrounded it.

The Carthega Telepathica was rooted in the mountain's top. However high the original peak was, it could not have compared with mankind's improvement on

geology. The needle speared the sky, the tallest manmade structure in the entire subsector. They could see only the lowest reaches of its smooth sides. Alkali clouds obscured the rest, but one had an impression of its size by the thickness of the shaft. The top was as slender as a blade, and cut into the airless void. At the base it was three miles thick, a monstrous, featureless grey, made of an exotic combination of various 'cretes, no window to break the smooth surface, nor any other mark besides.

In construction it was two tall triangles intersecting each other in a cruciform cross section, rising up as a hollow-sided pyramid. Its only other feature was the forests of hawsers, thicker than Titans were tall, that descended from the heavens. They were anchored to giant plugs driven far into Beta-Garmon III's hide all around the mountain, but from the Legio's perspective these anchor points were not visible, and the cables seemed like spears rammed home into the world. Every three hundred metres on the hawsers' lengths, a warning beacon shone. Every hawser had dozens of them, so that a shoal of red lights thronged the sky, bright and unwavering, like predator's eyes.

Esha let her gaze rise up the hawsers. Simple trigonometry gave her an idea of the needle's height; the Carthega Telepathica was so high, and the anchor ring so far above the cloud layer, that the hawsers were virtually parallel to the shaft of the tower.

Somewhere dozens of kilometres up was the astropathic temple itself. Esha had observed it as they descended from orbit. Seemingly small atop the spire that supported it, the temple was in fact large enough to house a relay choir of a thousand astropaths, and all their attendants.

'There are not many sights I have seen that made me feel small when in command of a Titan,' Esha Ani Mohana said quietly. 'That temple is one of them.'

'Yeah, well, the bigger they come,' Yeha Yeha said with a shrug.

Jephenir scowled at her. 'Don't say such ill-favoured things!'

'Says the lady with the ghost fixation,' said the moderati primus. 'Anyway, I outrank you, so I can say what I like.'

A chime from the oratorius desk interrupted the argument before it could become heated. Being cooped up in the head without the harmony of the MIU was testing for them all.

Yeha Yeha leaned back from her chair and glanced at Mephani Ohana's station. She looked up at Esha.

'Priority message, for you alone. Region command.'

‘I’ll take it in the atrium,’ she said. ‘Cease your arguments, both of you. Run weapons and systems checks with the moderati bellatus. If the enemy come I want to be ready.’ She looked out across the barren, rain-lashed mountainsides displayed upon the vidscreen. Yellow streams boiled down gullies. Toxic mist hurried over knife-edge ridges to wherever they were going. The terrain was poor ground for Titan conflict. ‘If they come,’ she said, and headed out into the atrium.

She sat herself at the chart desk, keyed in her ident code and set the device to hololithic communications. A light sculpture of Reesan Modano coalesced into being from a cloud of dancing motes. The transmission was restricted to a haughty face atop shoulders, so that he appeared like a bad holographic memorial bust of the kind sold to civilians on post-compliance words. He was princeps seniores of the Warp Runners who, by dint of having the most Titans on the mountain, was in overall command. Esha had fought with him at Hansu Hive several weeks before. She didn’t like him. She got the impression he didn’t like her.

He had a weak chin. She never trusted men with weak chins.

‘Ah,’ he said, as if surprised to see her. *‘I have a spot of bad news, I’m afraid.’*

Esha’s heart clenched. She feared for her mother. ‘Beta-Garmon II? Nyrcon?’ she said.

Modano laughed lightly, a meaningless, practised aristocratic pleasantry that set her teeth on edge. *‘Oh well, no, not really. The battle proceeds there, as far as I’m aware. No, it’s here, Beta-Garmon III. It looks like we’ve been rather out-manoeuvred. The traitors have launched an attack on Caldera City. I wouldn’t be surprised if this whole thing at Nyrcon wasn’t a ruse. I did vote against it myself but–’*

‘How many?’ Esha cut across him. Modano had a tendency to prattle on.

‘Steady on, old girl, I am in command here,’ he said, bristling. He recovered his mask of amiability quickly. *‘It’s a major attack a–’*

His image broke up suddenly, disintegrating into a shower of firefly sparks. They whirled about in an abortive attempt to make some other picture that Esha had a sudden and sincere desire not to see. She adjusted the machine’s settings. Modano did not return.

‘I’ve lost you. I repeat, I’ve lost you. Please remodulate projection parameters for heavy interference.’

Nothing for a moment, then shortly Modano reappeared, as icily affable as ever.

'Sorry about that. Hololiths, eh? Cast an image instantaneously across a planetary system, but get a bit of weather in the way…'

'You were saying. Enemy strength.'

'I was, wasn't I? Major. Large elements of the Sons of Horus Traitor Legion. Several Titan Legios.'

'All his Titans were supposed to be at Nyrcon.'

'Well then, it rather appears we underestimated his strength. I'm ordering half of our Titans to make for Caldera at all speed. If they push their reactors, they'll be there before nightfall tomorrow. This bloody weather will slow them down, but give them fine cover from the traitor fleet. It looks like we've been caught out. Horus wants Caldera.'

'Why?' said Esha. 'What benefit is there to him in taking the planetary capital?'

'Why? To stake claim to this whole system. If he takes Caldera, that leaves our boys at Beta-Garmon Three a touch out of luck. Once he has control over Caldera, Beta-Garmon Three will fall, and Nyrcon will most likely hold against our attack. We'll be driven out of the system, and the traitors will have a clear run at the Throneworld. Needless to say, I'd prefer not to be the chap that lets that happen. History is always cruel to men who make mistakes. You're staying here. Your little troop of hunters is perfect to hold this terrain, but I'm sending the heavy hitters over to Caldera immediately.'

'I don't think you should,' said Esha. The wind blew louder. *Domine Ex Venari* shook. The voices whispered entreaties to her.

'Why on earth not?'

'What if it's another feint?'

'Another feint?'

'To draw us away from here. The Diviner's Needle is the chief link we have to Terra.'

Modano's grainy features pulled in, and he shook his head. *'Communications denial? I don't think the needle is worth his time, not for that. Besides, since the warp storms blew out, we can get through without this relay. No, I believe he wants to consolidate his hold here, let his men have an easy passage. Nyrcon was a feint. Caldera Primus is the true target. Besides, he has no more Titans. This is it. He's committed his reserves. What kind of leader indulges in a double feint for a target of low value?'*

'One who bears the title Warmaster,' she said flatly.

'With all due respect, huntress, you are wrong.'

'At least contact the Primarch Sanguinius,' she said.

‘Why? For this? Not every battle is a match of cunning. Sometimes, and especially in engine war, brute force is the key to victory. He has shown us his hand – we should respond with a fist. My orders stand. Modano out.’

The image collapsed, plunging the atrium back into gloom. She sat there while the hololith sang its drawn-out song of deactivation, a plunging note that took forever to die.

Odani Jehan pulled herself out of the right-hand weapons deck, yawning widely and scratching at her head.

‘I woke you,’ said Esha. She regretted it. She did not foresee much rest in their future.

‘It doesn’t matter.’ Odani leaned on the worktop by the Titan’s tiny galley kitchen opposite Esha. ‘What was all that about?’

‘The end of the world, maybe,’ she said. She got up. ‘Eat. Prepare yourself.’ She checked her wrist chrono. ‘We enter the manifold in twenty-five minutes. The enemy are attacking Caldera Primus. If I’m right, it won’t be long before they’re here too.’

TWENTY-SIX

The Titandeath

Hours became days became a week. The Titans continued their war against each other to the point of exhaustion and beyond. *Luxor Invictoria*'s czella grew rank with human waste. There was no time for the moderati to leave their stations. A minimum of sustenance was automatically pumped into their bodies via nasal tubes and arterial shunts. Without them, the crew would have starved to death, if they did not die of dehydration first. They were bonded to machine at the deepest level, hardly aware of their mortal bodies. The need for human speech dwindled. They reacted together, fighting as one entity of a single mind. They shared their thoughts through the manifold, and though they still shouted out ranges and warnings, or gave orders, they did so mechanically, like the reflexes of a lowly servitor. Their voices lost humanity. Often they said the same thing at the same time.

Only the Great Mother retained a sense of self, for she was *Luxor Invictoria*.

Together, the Great Mother and *Luxor Invictoria* killed their kin. Earth-shattering weapons slew metal giants. The plains around Nyrcon were littered with the burning corpses of fallen mechanical gods. Such slaughter she had never seen. She wished it had remained that way.

Over the days the borders between her mind and the Titan's thinned to nothing. She remembered the first binding, the touch of the machine through the mind impulse unit. She remembered its soul, raw and powerful, yet skittish as any horse, new born and defiant of a world it did not yet understand.

She remembered taming it.

She remembered the events as the Titan too, his inchoate thoughts, images of things he had no names for and therefore no true concept of, ideas that would never have form until a human mind touched and shaped them.

The first time the Great Mother had come into *Luxor Invictoria*'s being, the faint traces of the other machines she had mastered clung to her soul like outdoor scents brought indoors. They frightened and calmed the machine at the same time. To the Titan's simple mind, it was as if a god descended through the fuzzy murk of incomprehensible data and ignited his soul with a touch.

Through Mohana's humour, the Titan found the recollection amusing. Possessed by the Titan's detachment, Mohana found the memory irrelevant to the ongoing situation. Where one being began and the other ended no theolog or deimechanic would be able to discern. This heightened union was the acme of the princep's art. Time and experience were the only way to reach full enlightenment, and then only for a select few.

Mohana Mankata Vi was the first of the first of her Legio, the founding master, the mother of machines. Now she was the last of the first. Her companions had died in battle or from age as the Great Crusade went on, until only she remained to witness this new, terrible era of civil war. In its fires, her daughters died. A fear that she would be left alone kindled in her breast. *Luxor Invictoria* wailed at the sharing.

In her infologs were kept the deaths of all members of her Legio. Plotted against time, the numbers formed a graph line that revealed the Legio's wars. It went up with each conflict and dropped with every short period of peace. Sometimes one or two god-engines would be lost, sometimes more, but never had so many been lost so quickly. The numbers rose from the beginning of Horus' betrayal, the line losing its smooth progress, climbing in jagged steps through Paramar, and Edessa, Jantamer and Elp. Then onto this campaign, where it rose ever more steeply, through Theta-Garmon, Beta-Garmon III and other engagements, until it soared high during the Third Battle of Nyrcon, this death of Titans. Hers was not the only Legio to suffer. She saw the corpses of many noble orders and the same count of traitors besides, though in all the wrecks she saw not one engine of the Legio Mortis, the Warmaster's favoured. This would have given her pause were she not numbed with grief.

Tangled in the wreckage of Titans from forty Legios were the majority of Mohana Mankata Vi's kin.

Three of her four myrmidons fought alongside her yet. Two were undamaged,

but the third, *Adamantine Heart*, was badly battered. Its pelvic gyroscopic arrays had taken a hit, and it moved with a cripple's walk. One arm terminated in a tangled mess of blackened plasteel and wire. The loss of a void shield projector made it more vulnerable still. Under normal circumstances, Mohana would have ordered *Adamantine Heart* away, and it would have been retrieved. There was no chance of that on the plains of Nyrcon.

They moved through broken hills of twisted metal. Not only god-machines littered the plain, but also massive pieces of debris blasted from the hive or fallen from orbit. The four Titans stalked their prey like a pride of lions hugging the scrub. The battle had fragmented into a thousand smaller confrontations, ideal hunting for the likes of the Legio Solaria.

An auspex return pinged in Mohana Mankata Vi's mind.

'Contact,' she said. 'Nine hundred metres and closing.' Her words were carried as impulses to her myrmidon princeps, tagged to the auspex feed. The bright pulse of a heat source glowed on the far side of a mound of wreckage come down from the hive. All of them shared it.

Without needing to be ordered, the Titans spread out, *Adamantine Heart* holding back to cover *Luxor Invictoria*'s rear. The other two Warlords, *Sagitta Auri* and *Astra Venator* stalked forward.

'Power profiles to low,' Mohana Mankata Vi ordered. To her practised eye the target was probably a lure. 'Supposition of probable ambush. Make them think we are incautious, then counter and destroy.'

With *Sagitta Auri* and *Astra Venator* out in front, the maniple moved forward towards the end of the hill of metal and broken rockcrete. They trod nimbly over lesser piles of debris and heaps of earth thrown up by the impact.

Mohana remained alert for other contacts. She was not disappointed.

As the maniple neared the end of the broken hive spire, a dozen fresh contacts sprang into life.

'Fifteen engines minoris. Knights, three banners. Engaging,' communicated *Sagitta Auri*'s princeps, Catarin Mej.

Inaccurate fusion and battle cannon fire streaked past the lead Titans. Their void shields shone.

'Forwards into them. *Adamantine Heart*, about and hold the rear.'

Mohana Mankata Vi swung her Titan to the left, so that they were facing the mess of metal. Their minds conjoined; she had no need to order her crew to perform a deep auspex sweep of the ruin. It simply happened, easy as blinking. Cavities and densities shone in contrasting colours in her mind's eye.

A Knight's reactor detonated with an underwhelming, sucking bang. *Sagitta Auri* and *Astra Venator*'s void shields whooped. Their weapons arms swept across the field, striking out at the nimble Knights. The lesser engines were attempting to get around the back, to surround the lead pair of Warlords and bring down the void shields by attacking from all sides. Gatling cannons chewed up the ground. Rounds deflected from ion shields. The Knights were good but some were inexperienced. One was a little slow swinging his ion shield around to cover his side, earning a direct hit and spectacular death from *Sagitta Auri*'s laser blasters.

The Knights scattered, their formations melting and reforming. All their actions were distraction. More reactor signs were igniting on the other side of the ridge. A full maniple of traitor god-machines lay in wait. Standard engagement tactics dictated they would come around both sides of the obstruction and catch First Maniple in a crossfire while they were dealing with the Knights.

Mohana Mankata Vi was not going to allow that to happen.

If they had weathered the battle with a full number of engines, she surmised the enemy to be skilled. Even if they were an ad hoc formation of survivors, that still implied a certain level of intelligence when so many other Titans fought alone. It would pay to be cautious. Before she acted, she let the enemy maniple split, three of them heading around the near end towards *Sagitta Auri* and *Astra Venator*, two back towards the rear where *Adamantine Heart* waited. Her lead Titans' void shields suffered for the pause, but if she moved too soon, her counterattack would be spotted and Legio Solaria would likely lose.

'Hold ground. On my command, push through. *Adamantine Heart*, maintain position.'

As she spoke she was already searching out a weak spot in the metal wall before her. Finding it swiftly, she discharged all her weapons, bringing down a section of crumpled hive skin in an avalanche of plasteel.

The enemy would have seen that. Time was of the essence.

Luxor Invictoria bowed its head and charged into the gap. Metal screeched on the carapace. The Titan jarred as a sheet caught on its laser blasters. Mohana forced it through, ignoring the sympathetic pains of jagged edges slicing into *Luxor Invictoria*'s armour plating.

The Titan burst through into a void and quickly crossed, then smashed through feeble interior walls into an insect hive of rooms. The partitions were paper thin to the giant machine, and posed no more resistance to it than a wasp's nest would to a wrecking ball.

Mohana felt her foot snag. The Titan staggered, but her crew were the best in the Legio, and her steerswoman corrected the error. The skin of the spire's far side was near.

'Now,' she ordered. *Luxor Invictoria*'s plasma reactor rumbled as the twin volcano cannons charged.

Outside, *Sagitta Auri* and *Astra Venator* lumbered forwards, breaking their way through the darting banners of Knights. They swatted a couple to pieces with their weapons but otherwise paid them no heed. Their true quarry was ahead.

The myrmidons emerged around the point of the fallen spire into a punishing barrage. The Imperial Hunters opened fire themselves with every weapon at their disposal, but with three Warlord Titans against two, their void shield banks dropped rapidly.

Now was the moment. *Luxor Invictoria* blasted a hole in the outer wall, stepped back, and barged through.

She came out firing. The three enemy Titans had their backs to her. The other two were rounding the far end of the ruin. With a skill born of years of service, she had her engine target the enemy nearest to her daughter engines. Its void shields were already on the verge of collapse, and her laser blasters took the last down.

'Volcano cannon,' she commanded.

The gargantuan laser weapons fired once, their discharge twinned burning scalpels of photonic might that sliced neatly into the Titan's back, laying open its reactor. Fortune was with her, and the power plant gushed roaring gas over the two Titans still facing *Sagitta Auri* and *Astra Venator*, spoiling their aim and taxing their void shields. The damaged Titan collapsed, plasma boiling from its broken back. A concentrated volley from her laser blasters brought down one of the other Titan's void shields.

'Recharge weapons!' she commanded.

Mohana's laser blasters were at full power within seconds. The volcano cannon took much longer to charge. She could not tarry, so had her engine walk backwards, playing the multiple shots of her blaster over the leftmost Titan. Belatedly, the enemy split and began to pace away from the conflict. *Sagitta Auri* and *Astra Venator* moved up, Knights still snapping at their heels. The left-hand enemy's final shield went out as the volcano cannon's ready notification sang clear and high in the manifold.

'Left-hand engine, right leg,' she commanded.

Again the spears of light were cast. They slammed into the knee, melting the

thigh armour and welding the joint solid. The Titan wobbled, thrown off balance as it attempted to take a step. Shots from First Maniple's engines in front of it sheared off its right arm, before a splash of plasma from a sunfury annihilator took off its head, and it stopped dead, ablaze from carapace to waist.

Now there was one enemy Titan remaining, Mohana left it to *Sagitta Auri* and *Astra Venator*. *Luxor Invictoria* swung around. Mohana thought-ordered the reactor to full output, rerouting her energy supplies to the locomotors, and urged her Titan to pursue the remaining pair of the enemy maniple around the far end of the spire.

She found them venting fire at the damaged *Adamantine Heart*. The Legio Solaria Warlord fared badly, and had taken more damage. Surrounded by void displacement and the tremendous energies of Titan weapons firing, the enemy were blind to Mohana Mankata Vi's approach. *Luxor Invictoria* opened fire directly behind them. Although the Titan the Great Mother chose was possessed of a full complement of voids, the potency of her weaponry was so great it overwhelmed the shield's ability to dissipate the shots, and the Titan was carved in two.

Outgunned, the second Titan retreated. *Luxor Invictoria* traded fire with it until it was out of sight in the dust-clogged wastes.

Knights of House Vi had emerged from the sand and were aiding *Sagitta Auri* and *Astra Venator* in finishing off the last engine of the enemy maniple. But the engagement was not won without cost.

Adamantine Heart was crippled.

Energy spikes from its damaged reactor core provoked loud warnings from *Luxor Invictoria*'s systems, imploring her to back away, but the Great Mother held her ground.

'My daughter,' she said.

Gehana Amana was the princeps. Her voice came over the vox clear and free of the influence of the machine. She had come out of the manifold.

'Great Mother, Adamantine Heart *is critically damaged. We must beg your permission to abandon the hunt.'*

'Permission granted,' the Great Mother said. *Adamantine Heart*'s reactor surges were growing wilder by the moment. 'Go. Live.' The crew's chances of survival outside of the machine were slim. The environmental conditions were awful, and men died where god-machines fought.

'Evacuation under way,' Amana voxed.

Mohana Mankata Vi fearlessly strode past the crippled engine. As they passed,

Luxor Invictoria lowed a mighty vocal salute to his wounded sister.

Explosive bolts blew all around the head, and it flew free on a short-lived burst of propellant, carrying the command crew away. Tiny figures rappelled down from the rear balcony and began to run.

Mohana Mankata Vi wished them well in her heart.

Adamantine Heart's reactor blew as the remainder of the maniple drew away. The yellow glare of its detonation lit up the battlefield as bright as a day on Old Earth, before war drew its curtains of dust across the plains again.

TWENTY-SEVEN

Eye of the Needle

Nuntio Dolores had a new voice. The old music had gone. Its war-horns growled and spat sounds too close to words for Harrtek's comfort, articulating the bloody desires of its new and furious soul.

Outwardly little seemed different about *Nuntio Dolores*. Its mechanical motion was supplanted by a more organic fluidity, but this was not something that would be obvious to someone not deeply familiar with the operation of god-engines.

It was within that Ardim Protos' ritual had made the greatest change. Like any Titan, Legio Vulpa's war machines took on the personality imprints of their masters, and as a result they were belligerent, impatient and revelled in destruction. *Nuntio Dolores*' old soul was well known for its fury. It was nothing compared to the thing that occupied the engine now.

None of the machine readings made any sense. According to the infosphere's monitoring systems, the networked cogitators, logic engines and servitors that supported the Titan's machine-spirit were malfunctioning. They no longer spoke to one another. Detailed breakdowns of logic-engine traffic showed nonsensical bursts of high activity that dropped to nothing and rose again, repeatedly stressing the components. Nothing but gibberish code emanated from them.

It was as if they were screaming.

The servitor brains were dying. Wafts of spoiling meat drifted through the czella from the containment jar arrays deeper in the machine. Where the servitors possessed more of their bodies, they were muscle-locked rigid, the

remains of their faces a rictus of howling rage. Their eyes, once dead and stripped of intelligence, rolled in their faces with a lunatic's anger.

The landscape of the manifold had altered beyond recognition. If Harrtek attempted to visualise the machine-spirit, he was confronted by a standing wave of boiling blood in whose red surface flensed skulls appeared and were sucked back in. Behind it was the new soul of the machine. Furious, truculent, yet bound to Harrtek's will. It would not let itself be seen, but he felt its immortal might, far greater than anything that could be called forth by science alone. It possessed an awareness the old machine-spirit did not.

Into this deadly being Terent Harrtek's soul slotted.

The Harrtek of the crusade would have been appalled by this perversion of his war machine, but he revelled in his stolen power. Never had the term 'god-engine' seemed so apt.

New power surged through him as the Titan approached the defences ringing the base of the Carthega mountain. The peak had lost its name, subsumed by that of the structure that was built upon it. The bare rock of the mountain's base was the needle's footing, and though remade by mankind into a neatly tiered array of defences, its natural origins remained evident, here and there.

Harrtek and the other altered Titans marched directly at the defence lines alone. Protos had arrogantly committed them to this fight as a demonstration of their power. They were the line breakers, sent to open a way up the mountain for those that came behind. Eight Warlords were inadequate for the task. Before the ritual Harrtek would have refused, but a bloody recklessness had him. The result of the battle didn't matter to him, only the fight, the chance to spill blood and take heads. Such pleasure filled him as the Titans neared the lines, wild, uncaring and free of thought.

The storm hid them until they were ten kilometres out. Thereafter, the defences of the Carthega Telepathica opened fire.

Thousands of guns spoke. Wide shots slammed into the water sheeting over the lower slopes. Many hit home, but the void shields held, shining with a new, ruddy light where they were struck. Leering, daemonic faces scudded over the energy skin, jaws wide to consume the ordnance falling through the rain.

<Forwards!> Harrtek roared in his mind. His Titan screeched, a sound no war-horn should be able to produce. The other eight screamed with him, their raging voices a weapon in themselves that shattered falling shells and sent shockwaves through the rain.

<Forwards!> he called again.

The Titans built up to a run, pounding up the steepening incline, their feet gouging giant prints into soft shale. The rains had turned the mountainside into a riverine playground. Streams sped down rockcrete channels. Water leapt in muddy arcs from gutter spouts in the walls. It oozed from strata of rock. It poured off the Titan's carapaces. The Titans spread out. Even so their massive weight caused slips in the land that would have felled less nimble machines, but against all odds they climbed upwards towards the lowest line, surrounding the first set of gates and towers that barred the needle's principal road.

Harrtek was raging, shouting nonsense. There was no coordination between the eight. They were no maniple, but a collection of mighty machine champions. They held their fire until they were close, but when the first let fly with a barrage of rockets, the rest followed suit, and the space between the Titans and the wall was filled with violent light traded between towers and god-engines.

Nuntio Dolores was angered that it was not the first to fire, and increased speed to be the first at the walls. Laser blasters and volcano cannon fired simultaneously at a tower. Alarms blared all over the czella as the reactor spiked dangerously, but neither Harrtek nor the Titan cared about the stress. Void shields collapsed around the bastion, and it trained its own guns on the approaching Warlord. Harrtek screamed violent words from languages he did not know. As soon as the volcano cannon was charged again, he fired it, though more tocsins blared, warning of overheating and the damage it could cause the gun.

The cannon's beam bored through the rain, turning precipitation to roiling steam and carving its ionisation mark into the air. The tower's base evaporated. Laser blaster shots riddled it, tearing the breach wider, and the tower slumped down, falling from the wall, tearing out a hole in the reinforced rockcrete. Pathetic streaks of lasgun shots stabbed out from the walls either side where desperate men waited to die.

Harrtek sidestepped the tumble of rubble slipping down the hill, leaning his machine into the rising slope. There was no divide between he and the creature bound to the Titan. They were one, and he felt the body of the machine as his own: every drop of rain that hit his armour, the slip of the mountainside as he climbed upwards, the pressure in the Titan's hydraulic tubing and play of the motive force down every cable. He knew it better than his own body. He laughed madly, carried away with the sensations filling him, urged on by the need to spill blood.

'Protos! Protos!' he cackled. 'Had you told me what you had for me, I would

have said yes immediately!'

He reached the wall. With his mighty fist he gripped the breach left by the fallen tower and heaved, pulling the Titan through the line. The disruption fields surrounding the arioch's fingers rent the atomic structure of the fortifications apart, and he was forced to dig deeper and deeper as he hauled himself up.

As he passed through, his cockpit head was level with the rampart. Terrified men in sealed rainwear fired into his face. They were within the aegis, and their shots bored into armour, but they could not harm him. Harrtek laughed; it emerged from the Titan's war-horns as a diabolical sound that froze the soldiers or sent them fleeing. He shouldered his way further in, swivelling his laser blasters to gun down the men as they ran.

Then he was into the ring, on the inside of the walls. The ground had been planed flat to allow god-engines to bolster the defences, and the going became easy. He stalked around the ring towards the access road, firing at will, targeting shield generators and munitions dumps, blowing out the backs of towers and mowing down infantry by the score. His brothers in blood were making their own ingress points, tearing and blasting through the walls. Only one of their number had succumbed to the enemy. It burned as it walked under heavy fire, before finally succumbing and falling down. For a moment it lay still, and then something in it gave. A sheet of fire roared skywards. For a moment it was a face screaming out a mix of frustration and joy at release, then nothing but scattered lightning, racing off through the yellow cloud.

'He does not care,' Harrtek said giddily. 'He does not care whence the blood flows!'

Alarms sounded all over the Imperial defences, the rising-falling wail that had heralded destruction since the dawn of machine-aided wars. A squadron of tanks edged around a bastion and opened fire. Harrtek slew them all with a volcano shot. The minor spirits of the gun squealed in anguish. Coolant levels flashed at near depleted. It did not matter.

The guns on the upper levels had yet to begin firing on the lowest line, but that would not be long coming. *Nuntio Dolores* screamed up at them in challenge.

A war-horn answered.

Down the road from the second line a loyal Warlord strode. Rain pounded from its carapace, soaking its banners. Lightning and gunfire flash lit up its livery: blue and gold. A black sun was the principal device on its badge, that of the Legio Astorum, the Warp Runners. Water ran over its nameplate, *Hegemon.* Like *Nuntio Dolores*, it was equipped for close-quarter fighting; a claw the match of

Harrtek's own hung at its right side, and a sunfury cannon was its left hand. It swung off the road and marched towards Harrtek's machine in direct challenge.

War-horns blaring, *Hegemon* opened fire. Rockets roared from the arrays atop the carapace, slamming into Harrtek's voids. Alarms sang from every quarter as the first two shields collapsed. Harrtek made to fire with the volcano cannon, but it would not respond. A hot pain burned his fingers. He remembered himself a little, pulled back from the glorious, angry heat of the Titan's new soul and saw that the cannon's coolant was depleted. The laser blasters too had shut down for emergency cooling. He screamed impotently as more rockets weakened his third shield. *Nuntio Dolores* voiced scorn for its foe, a cry cut short when the sunfury fired.

A broad beam of electric white light slammed into Harrtek's final shield and took it down. The plasma stream splashed against his left arm, bringing forth a cry of sympathetic pain from Harrtek. He bit hard, drawing blood from his tongue. *Nuntio Dolores* roared. Molten metal hissed from the wound. The upper arm section was weakened. Voices and tocsins in the czella yammered for his attention. Through a mouth full of blood he tried to speak.

'Open fire. Open fire.'

For a moment he was within his own skull again. The czella was full of smoke. His moderati lolled in their chairs, seemingly dead, though none had a mark on them. He blinked, and for a split second he saw an organic chamber of pulsing membranes filled with dark blood.

He blinked again. The room was as it should be. His moderati worked. He moved his hand to his helm, and stopped. Viscous matter coated his sleeves and the throne's arm, only reluctantly letting him move. He stared at it, suddenly feeling lost.

An impact rocked the Titan. *Hegemon* had closed. Bolts exploded all over *Nuntio Dolores*' front plating as it drew back its fist for a final strike.

Harrtek let out a wordless roar, and *Nuntio Dolores* reached out from the fresh-minted hellscape of the manifold and dragged him back in.

Bound together in sacred union once more, the entity that was *Nuntio Dolores* and Harrtek combined lunged forwards. Its own arioch reached, and grabbed, closing on *Hegemon*'s fist as it descended for the killing blow. Disruption fields crackled and banged as loudly as the artillery as they meshed. For a second, the Titans were locked together, neither gaining advantage over the other. The sunfury rotated towards *Nuntio Dolores*' midriff, charging coils lighting for a kill-shot, but Harrtek leaned into it, blocking it out with his volcano cannon. It

fired anyway, the stream streaking past him harmlessly.

Slowly, slowly, *Nuntio Dolores* forced *Hegemon*'s claw backwards. There should have been little disparity between the Titans. They were of the same mark, and similar patterns, but though damaged, *Nuntio Dolores* was undoubtedly stronger. *Hegemon*'s arm was forced away. The Titan pressed its feet into the ground and leaned into its foe, but *Nuntio Dolores* pushed it back, its claw toes ripping up the paved surface of the defences.

A stealthy chime sounded, informing him the laser blasters were ready to fire again.

Harrtek shouted. *Nuntio Dolores* roared. With a great shove, he rammed the enemy Titan backwards, and yanked down hard.

Hegemon's claw came free in his fist.

Harrtek took a step back. Laser blasters swivelled down to point directly at the enemy's faceplate.

With a thought, he fired, and as the bolts of light smashed into his foe, he saw an axe descending over and over again.

Hegemon stumbled backwards, and tripped, going down hard. Harrtek left its corpse steaming in the rain.

'Engine kill,' said a voice that no machine could make, a dark and daemonic growl full of pleasure at the slaughter. It rang throughout the Titan, but it was loudest in the pits of Harrtek's soul.

'A skull for the Lord of Skulls,' said the voice.

'A skull for the skull throne,' it said, and Harrtek whispered along with it. Blood from his tongue ran down his chin.

'Blood, blood, blood!' it growled, then Harrtek took up its chant and shouted.

'Blood for the Blood God!'

The Titan screamed its victory to the world. The remaining possessed engines added their voices to the song. The first line had been breached by Legio Vulpa's mechanical berserkers. The time was now, they signalled. Victory was nigh.

Out in the wastes, war-horns answered.

A hundred god-engines of the Warmaster's most favoured Legio advanced in line, their pennants soaked by the downpour. Red and black they were, their liveries unmarked by months of war that had consumed their sibling orders by the dozen. Saved for the final, destructive task of bringing down the Carthega Telepathica, they had spent time others filled with fighting regrouping, repairing and preparing. They were fresh where others were exhausted, supplied where others carried empty weapons. Maniple after maniple of them emerged from the

storm, ready and eager for the test ahead. Guns rippled out a hasty response from all tiers of the mountain's defences. It would not be enough.

Legio Mortis, kept out of battle for many months, strode out of the rain in its entirety.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Striking the Anvil

Explosions ripped through another bulkhead, tearing wide an entrance in the wall with flame and flying shrapnel.

'Into them!' Azkaellon cried. He stormed through the gap, taking three glancing rounds to his left side, then ignited his jump pack and jetted over the heads of the Sons of Horus in the shaft on the other side of the wall. The central power conduit for the entire fort, the shaft was a kilometre across, and many more times deep. Railless walkways ringed the well every few hundred metres. The flash and roar of close-fought battles occupied many. Glow from the Anvil's powerful reactors shone up from the bottom, uplighting the war masks of the traitors, and making their armour's barbarous embellishments appear even more savage. Two dozen Blood Angels were forcing their way in after Azkaellon, pushing back the traitors. Corpses of warriors killed by the explosion made for treacherous footing, but they came through fast, assailing a position the foe had thought secure until then. They had been firing upwards, pinning down another group of Azkaellon's brothers. Once their threat was dealt with, the attack on the upper levels could continue to plan.

But first, the group had to be defeated.

Azkaellon dodged through bolts speeding from the companionway. His wide, artificial wings held him up, enhancing the jump pack's capabilities and granting him something close to true flight. He looped about in the wide shaft and came back down, sword drawn back to strike at the traitors. A pair of bolts detonated

on his plastron, marring the gold of the plate with carbon starbursts, but the artificer armour held. His sword descended, severing the arm of one Sons of Horus legionary and carving deep into the side of another, where it stuck fast.

He came down hard, using his blade to swing the wounded Space Marine to the brink of the shaft. With a hard kick, he shoved the traitor from the end of his blade, sending him plummeting to his death. The one-armed Space Marine was reaching awkwardly across himself to draw his bolt pistol left-handed. Azkaellon raised his sword to cut him down, but a volley of boltgun fire from behind blew out the traitor's reactor pack, and he fell dead.

'Level secured,' a Blood Angels sergeant voxed.

Azkaellon let his sword point drop. The last few traitors on the walkway were dying. Sea-green armoured bodies cluttered the grillwork floor, but there were more than a few red suits of battleplate lying among the dead.

He looked up. The pressure removed, the warriors on the upper floors were redoubling their attack. The shaft would soon be theirs.

'Too costly,' said Azkaellon. 'We cannot afford more casualties of this scale.'

'They fight like cornered animals. They have become reckless,' said the sergeant.

'That is what concerns me.' He looked down the shaft to the reactor glow. As yet it burned steadily. 'Then we must be quick if we cannot be careful. Onwards,' he said.

Boots clattering, the Blood Angels ran on to their next encounter.

Battle raged all across the Anvil, from the flat top where walled citadels challenged the stars to the daggered bottom pointing its threat at Nyrcon City. The starfort had been a target in every conflict for the capital. Though it had been attended to by the Warmaster's engineers following its capture some months before, still much of it was ruinous. Huge holes left decks by the hundred exposed to the void. Few of its ship-killing batteries remained, but although many of its teeth had been pulled, the Anvil was still of high strategic importance. If the Anvil remained in enemy hands, Nyrcon City would forever be at risk.

The Blood Angels warred to take it, with Azkaellon's group heading to secure the reactors. The Sons of Horus infested every cranny. At first Azkaellon took the enemy's numbers as confirmation of how highly Horus valued the Anvil, but as the fight wore on, the manner of his foes raised concerns. They were a ragtag army with little in the way of unit coherency. They fought with great energy but

little coordination. Their support units were understrength, seemingly gathered at random from traitor regiments and Dark Mechanicum clades. Beta-Garmon had been the death of so many that this was not unusual – scarcely a unit of any sort remained without casualties – but even taking that into account, the Sons of Horus seemed less like a formation to him than a rabble.

He slaughtered the traitors as he pondered their nature. Their unit markings were obscured, in some cases their armour blackened in soot. Their trophies and fetishes were even more outlandish than those he had seen elsewhere. They were punishment battalions, so far as he could tell, and such penal troops were expendable.

You do not garrison a key strategic fortress with expendable troops, he thought.

His fears were borne out when they finally emerged into the reactor halls. They were immense, dozens of voidship-grade plasma hearts serial-linked to power the station. He fought through the desperate guardians of a major gate, impaling the last upon his crackling blade and allowing the traitor's weight to pull the corpse free of the sword.

Seeing his prize so close, Azkaellon ordered his Techmarines to force the locks of the armoured gates while arranging his men for the last elements of resistance that would surely await them on the other side.

Locking pins disengaged with rolling booms. The doors hissed apart, opening up the first of the reactor chambers to view. Azkaellon raised his sword, ready to charge. A hundred bolters trained upon the gate.

Searing light flooded out from the naked balls of plasma dominating the chamber, which were held back only by invisible, magnetic fetters.

Azkaellon lowered his weapon. There were no more troops beyond. His misgivings grew.

He walked forwards.

'My lord!' cautioned one of his lieutenants.

'I have to be sure,' said Azkaellon, holding up his free hand. 'Stay back.'

He walked to the edge of the gateway. Still no one came to attack him. To his right, huge tiered galleries of machines rose up opposite the reactor core. They were all unattended. All were smashed. His heart sank as he faced the lowest level of consoles, and saw the readings the machines displayed on their few undamaged screens.

'By the Blood,' he said. He turned back to his men. 'Priority command, immediate evacuation. Everybody off the station!' His vox officers went to work before he had finished speaking, their supplemental equipment cutting through

the enemy's denial broadcasts.

Azkaellon turned back to the displays. Red lines crept upwards. Soon, the reactor containment fields would fail, unleashing the energies they contained and turning the Anvil into a city-killing bomb.

'Horus never intended to hold it,' he said. 'Nyrcon City is a trap.'

TWENTY-NINE

Against the Walls of Nyrcon

They were attacking the walls again.

Five times the loyal Legio of Mars had made their assault against Nyrcon's walls. Five times they had been thrown back. Mohana Mankata Vi walked with the last of her myrmidons, the Warlord *Sagitta Auri.* The rest were gone into death. Some time before, she had joined a party of six others, all of different Legios. Five deferred to her command. The last refused and walked away to his own demise.

The fates of her daughters were unknown, but she suspected the majority to be dead. Casualties on the traitor side were near total. Those of the Imperium were not far behind. The wastes around the city walls were a vast junkyard of dead engines. Machines venerated by the Cult Mechanicus were broken into pieces, their nameplates obscured, crews ash, ancient technologies mashed to junk. It dazed Mohana Mankata Vi to witness god-engines lying like the lowly dead of an infantry formation, with no one to salvage their secrets.

Too much knowledge had been lost. She looked upon that scene and saw ahead an age of darkness every bit as grim as the one the Emperor had saved them from.

Her senses were becoming unreliable. Fatigue accelerated her mental deterioration. She fancied, at times, that she fought a war of giants from obscure mythologies, and not a battle between war engines. At other times the world appeared to be constructed entirely of machined parts and gleaming metal. But

she could still fight, though she sobbed silently in her tank at the roll of the dead, and the machine's soul leached more of herself away.

Her mongrel maniple were ordered forwards by a servant of the primarch who had neither name nor rank. He was only a voice that must be obeyed, voxed out from the *Red Tear* somewhere high in orbit. For the final time Mohana's group approached the fortifications, their remaining Titans raking the defences with savage energies.

Piles of dead Titans made makeshift ramps to battlements equally littered with brutalised machine parts. The hive skin smoked from a hundred thousand impact points. Fires burned from every hole. Surely the inhabitants were dead by now. The hive was worthless, and yet still the war raged for Nyrcon City.

The defences were reduced from their previous strong state, the towers brought down and the weapons within silent. But though the strength of the hive had lessened, so had that of the besiegers. Of a force hundreds strong, less than two hundred remained, and of that number only a handful had escaped damage. They relied on energy cannons. Ammunition for their projectile weapons was uniformly depleted, and no resupply could be made in that awful, hellish melee.

Yet even with this reduced portion of their armaments usable, the Titans remained fearsome. Their reactors were limitless sources of energy. If husbanded carefully, their lasers and their plasma cannons would fire for many months.

Sagitta Auri and the Warlord *Dei Deus* moved ahead of the siege Titan *Atranican*, a heavy model equipped for battery, with a wrecking ball for one hand and a multi-headed drill on the other, both shimmering with disruption fields. The two smaller Titans shielded the heavier engine with their bodies, firing as they walked. Mohana Mankata Vi ordered it to be so. *Atranican*'s delivery to the wall was all that mattered, if her part in the siege was to have any meaning at all.

She walked at *Atranican*'s shoulder, her volcano cannons primed. All the fire they drew came from the hive now, and its garrison, like its assailants, was low on ammunition.

'Forwards, to the wall,' she said. She highlighted a weak point nearly breached. The princeps voxed their agreement. Though she was a Grand Master of a Legio, she commanded this group of strangers by their consent only.

The Titans marched under fire, as stalwart as a testudo of the ancient Romanii. Their voids took the worst of the bombardment. The shots coming in at the maniple lacked coordination. The hive had barely a single battery intact.

'Spread,' she commanded. 'Direct all fire on my target. Then *Atranican* is to

engage the fabric of the wall.'

The Titans opened up their formation, though *Atranican* remained sheltered between *Sagitta Auri* and *Dei Deus*. Mohana Mankata Vi took the foremost position, and set *Luxor Invictoria*'s stance for the firing of its cannons.

As she moved into position, the view wavered. Memory intruded, and she witnessed the plains of her youth before her. Against a rising of dismay she engaged the Titan's biomonitors to seek out the problem in her brain and adjust her neurochemistry. The outside world returned with an accompaniment of warnings. Her mental architecture was at the limit of reparability. Her mind was entering the first stages of decoherence.

But she could still fight. She painted the wall of the city in her mind, wide casting the information to her mongrel maniple. To honour her, they waited for her to fire first.

The reactors engaged, letting out the hearty thrum of energy channelled to destructive purpose. This might be the very last time she heard it, she thought. In life, one expects to do something for the first time, but one never anticipates a last.

Releasing the energy stream was sweet sorrow.

Volcano cannon beams, outmatched solely by defence laser beams and a voidship's lances, sprang from her metal fists. Volcano cannon beams could melt through mountainsides. They were limited in range by the curvature of the planet, nothing else. So close, their effect was predictably devastating. Rockcrete glowed white and ran, great gobbets of molten material flowing down the wall and pooling on the ground.

The others fired then, laser blasters, sunfury cannon and other volcano beams breaking the wound wider, chipping away at the forty-metre-thick walls with tools of superhot gas and coherent light.

Her volcano cannon's machine-spirits trilled. They were close to overheating. With a thought she shut them down and flushed out their focusing chambers with a burst of precious coolant.

Atranican moved in towards the glowing wall face, its drill bits already spinning. As it strode, its weapons moderati set the great ball swinging. It was an unwieldy weapon that required rare skill to wield.

As *Atranican* approached the wall a dozen cannons opened fire upon its stalking form. Displacement flare from its shields earthed itself into wrecks and naked stone. On it walked, swivelling its torso so that the ball whipped back. At the perfect distance, the wrecking ball swung forwards, crashing into the section

blackened by the maniple's attack.

The disruption field went off with a crack like nearby thunder. The wall shook. A fall of false stone rumbled from the upper reaches, tearing off the broken teeth of the crenellations. *Atranican* stepped back and swung again. In the lee of the wall, it was safe from the defenders in the hive, and there were none upon the walls when it began. Those that came to repel the Titan were shot by *Atranican*'s comrades. When not defending the Titan directly, they added to the damage the fortifications had already taken.

The work settled into a hypnotic rhythm. Mohana Mankata Vi fired her weapons, flushed out the great cannons, waited for them to cool, drew more gas from the atmosphere, waited for it to compress, fired again.

The first notice she had that there was something amiss was a flight of Blood Angels gunships streaking overhead so fast they were crimson blurs against the burning sky.

A frantic voice followed. *'All forces fall back!'* it called. *'The Anvil is falling!'*

There was no other warning. She did not see the station's reactors blow out in a final, vindictive act of sabotage. She did not see the debris hit the atmosphere and glow with the heat of re-entry. All was hidden by the towering cloud of smoke billowing from the dying hive.

Static swelled in her vox. The voice of the Legiones Astartes strategic liaison spoke one more time before it was lost.

'Run!'

The Titans turned about and strode away from the wall, their work unfinished. In long-range augur senses, Mohana Mankata Vi saw a fall of debris spreading like a hand to grab at the city.

'All power to locomotors!' she commanded, while urging the Titan into a heavy run. 'Clear the area!'

They could not run far enough. Glowing chunks of the Anvil roared down from on high. The first drove like a smoking fist into the walls around the hive's feet, sending up a plume of debris half the way to its point of origin. The ground rippled like water. Titans staggered. Then more debris came.

Through the screaming meteor shower, Mohana Mankata Vi ran. She ran like she did that day with Hamaj, so long ago. There was no decision to make now, no fateful turn of events one way or another. There was survival, or death.

Burning lumps smashed into the ground and the hive, more deadly than any cannon bombardment. They screamed so loudly through the air their passage

was audible in the czella, in her tank; a roaring, inferno blast accompanied by an almost human shrieking. Explosions ripped up the ground, and the largest pieces had yet to fall.

An enormous chunk of the station filled up *Luxor Invictoria*'s long-range auspex. It fell with such speed nothing could hope to outrun it, and fear gripped both the Titan and his mistress. A ball of fire venting streams of smoke and vapour crashed into Nyrcon City, opening up the hive wall like a knife guts a fish. The blast of energy it released was as great as the combined ordnance of a battlefleet. White light sheeted over the plains, and was followed by a tsunami-wall of overpressure nothing could resist.

Luxor Invictoria ran before it. The plain was upended. The walls blew out in a hundred places. The surface of the earth lifted up. The carcasses of Titans leapt high like insects shaken from a blanket. A rolling wall of dust and stone engulfed *Luxor Invictoria*, and the void shields went down under an irresistible onslaught of stone and metal. Rubble rang off the armour plating. The Titan stumbled, tripped, and came crashing down.

Mohana Mankata Vi was ripped free of the manifold. She heard the shouts of her crew, the alarms of the machines. The Titan tumbled over and over, the forces ripping at her barely cushioned by the tank.

Luxor Invictoria came to a rest face down. A hurricane howled over the downed god-engine. Mohana saw nothing but the indistinct flicker of power arcing from broken electronics through her sustaining fluid. All she felt was the sluggish movement of her amnion dripping from a crack in the armourglass.

She was dying.

These external stimuli faded as the machinery supporting her went offline. Starved of aid, her senses blacked out, and she moved into the internal spaces of her mind.

A soft wind blew over her skin.

She stepped free into the darkness.

THIRTY

Legio First

Wet snow splattered *Domine Ex Venari,* obscuring the feed from the Titan's auspexes. Visibility was further limited by blasts of light flashing through the storm with every lance strike against the Carthega Telepathica. Having judged their initial position to be of no use to the defence, Second Maniple were descending the mountain to attack the enemy. The Legio Mortis swarmed the walls, punching through the opening made by the eight possessed Titans of the Legio Vulpa. There were dozens of them, the most feared engines of war in all the galaxy. Esha could do nothing but kill as many as she could before *Domine Ex Venari* was inevitably destroyed.

'Pan left, ninety degrees,' Esha ordered. The torso of *Domine Ex Venari* swung around, bringing a vanguard machine of the Death's Heads into their line of fire. Five rockets from their precious supply detonated on its void shields. It drew off at speed, surprised by the emergence of Second Maniple from the mountain heights.

'Chase it down,' Esha ordered.

Os Rubrum and *Procul Videns* set off in swift pursuit. *Cursor Ferro, Steel Huntress, Domine Ex Venari* and *Velox Canis* continued their descent.

At the third line, the fortifications no longer encircled the mountain completely, but were made up of individual bastions interconnected by roads wide enough for Titans to patrol. Esha Ani Mohana's aim was to find some useful place there to bombard their attackers from. In a smaller war, her decision could have won

the day, but the action around the needle was apocalyptic, and Second Maniple's part was therefore small. The snowstorm glowed with the reflected light of the burning defence lines a thousand metres below. Esha's auspex returns were crowded by hundreds of engine signs. Legio Mortis was at close to full strength.

If the whole of our own Legio were here, we'd still have no chance against them, she thought. She kept this assessment to herself.

Horus had more than war engines attacking the mountain. Drop pods streaked down from orbit, blowing all their propellant only metres from the ground and coming to a near instant halt. Only the enhanced bodies of the Legiones Astartes could withstand such punishment. The Sons of Horus were taking to the field. On the mountain they had the advantage over the Titans, infantry being more able to scale its steep faces. They sought out high positions and commenced firing heavy weapons at the god-engines. To start with, they were an annoyance, but as the Legio Mortis closed in and void shields began to fail, sustained attack by infantry-borne heavy weaponry began to pose a problem.

Energy beams from Horus' war fleet lanced repeatedly down. For now they let the loyalist engines be, targeting instead the base of the giant tower. Its void shields had lasted for an hour or so. Now each blast carved molten scars in the needle's fabric.

The blizzard whipped past in horizontal lines of snow. A keep atop a mountain spur appeared suddenly from the murk. 'Here, we hold here,' ordered Esha. They took places upon the marshalling ground. The castellum was ablaze, the roof replaced by a column of fire and every window lit from within like a vast lantern. It overlooked the main access road rising up to the base of the needle, where the enemy concentrated their advance. 'Power down reactors. Stealth running. Wait for my signal.'

She wished they had time to cover their machines in their cameleoline meshes. The screens were fragile, and would be burned off by any kind of hit, but for ambushing the foe, for taking that first, vital shot before they were aware of the Imperial Hunters' presence, they were invaluable. They were a signature part of the Legio's equipment, but like everything else they were out of supply.

She'd have to rely on the storm to hide them. Esha struggled to see through the driving snow. Her auspexes were fouled by enemy countermeasures, the vox was virtually unusable for anything other than maniple communication, and the Titan's vid lenses strained against the storm. Wet lumps of melting ice streaked her sight, whether viewed inside her own mind or upon the visual plate at the czella front. Her auspex feed jumped and stuttered. There were too many engines

to accurately count. In the graphics overlaid upon the vid feed, their signatures clumped into a river of red, like lava flowing in reverse up the mountain towards her.

She found movement in the snow, and tracked it visually. The shape of a Warlord resolved itself from the blizzard and the strobing flares of weapons fire. It marched upwards, firing its weapons at the base of the needle, accelerating its destruction. It was as yet unaware of her maniple.

'Stand ready,' she voxed her unit.

They waited. Two Warhounds and two Reavers were more than a match for a Warlord. But timing could save them from its retaliation.

The Warlord carried on up, passing within two hundred metres. The enemy's augur soundings rang in Esha's mind, each questing machine sense given a different noise, so that it sounded like a jungle chorus. The Warlord's detection systems were at the forefront of this aural warning, but there were others coming, adding depth to the symphony of the machines.

'More enemy approaching. It has to be now. Strike, and withdraw.'

Four reactors spiked, feeding energy into weapons. Half-dormant shields sprang to full strength. The Warlord detected them instantly, and swung its torso about to bring its main weaponry to bear.

Chimes rang in rapid succession. *Domine Ex Venari*'s weapons were ready, then *Steel Huntress*' and the Warhounds'.

'Fire,' she ordered.

Velox Canis and *Cursor Ferro* opened fire first, their vulcan megabolters stripping the void shields of the Warlord back. It fired in return, raking the lip of the plateau the maniple occupied with blinding las-beams. *Cursor Ferro* took a hit that cost it a void, but the Warlord had a poor firing angle, and the rest of the volley grazed the rock or shot skywards without harm.

The Reavers fired next. Their lasblasters took down the last of the Warlord's shields. Only when the augurs sang out that it was shieldless did Esha unleash her volcano cannon, Durana Fahl following suit. Too late, the Warlord saw what peril it was in, and began to step backwards down the slope. The shots hit home, punching through its chest armour and opening up its reactor chamber to the air.

The reactor went critical. The Titan vanished in a blinding ball of light. A sphere of clear space was carved out of the blizzard for a second, before the snow flew in to fill it again.

Esha ignored the crowing machines confirming engine death.

'Withdraw,' she said.

Through hit and run attack and ambush tactics, Second Maniple stung the enemy. They caught a Reaver in a defile and gunned it down. They closed roads with triggered rockslides. The pace of action was unrelenting. An hour felt like a week.

Reinforcements from Beta-Garmon II began to arrive. It was a panicked response. Drop-ships approached without clear landing vectors. Those that evaded the attention of the enemy fleet were attacked by the massed fire of the Legio Mortis. They set down badly, often ablaze, landing gear scraping at the rock as they skidded down the mountainsides. They crashed and burned, the surviving engines inside fighting their way out of the wreckage to join the fray. As many died in the attempt to relieve the forces defending the mountain as made it down safely. A mad panic had set into the Imperial forces now the Warmaster's plans were clear.

All the while the Legio Mortis pressed upwards, swarming around the mountainside like ants. Where the walls were not destroyed they were assailed by the Space Marines of the Warmaster, and their tower guns fell silent. When the main defences were taken care of, Titans loyal to Terra became the primary focus of the enemy's attention, and then began to die.

Second Maniple kept moving. *Steel Huntress* was struck by a starship weapon and halted, dead, most of the crew slain, and Durana Fahl left badly injured with no hope of rescue. *Velox Canis* fell to the volleyed rockets of a flight of enemy gunships; Soranti Daha died screaming as the Titan was engulfed in flame and exploded. In time, only Esha Ani and Jehani Jehan were left alive in their small group. No contact came from Abhani Lus or Toza Mindev. They turned surely from the hunters to the hunted.

They did what the hunted always did, and headed for high ground, moving cautiously, always at risk. Defending the needle was no longer their consideration, only survival, and they headed away from the mountain and into its sister peaks.

They came upon Terent Harrtek's rabid machine quite by chance, within the arena of a corrie carved out by glaciers when the planet's climate ran without humanity's interference. Esha chose it for the sheer drop on one side: easy to defend, and providing a solid platform to fire upon the enemy below. She hoped to slay a few more engines before the end came.

Her last battle arrived sooner than she'd expected.

They entered the concavity before they saw Harrtek, by which time it was too late. A phantom auspex return in the storm became a solid presence, and then

there he was, coming out of the blizzard right at them. *Nuntio Dolores* howled to see such choice prey set before it, and broke into a run.

'Encircle,' said Esha, as soon as *Nuntio Dolores* appeared.

Jehani Jehan went immediately wide, looping out of harm's way while riddling the Warlord with her guns. The enemy Titan had lost its voids, and the shots hit home, but the Warlord kept on coming, too fast and fluidly for a war engine of its size. After the hard climb, *Domine Ex Venari* had no power to spare for its volcano cannons but fired wildly with its laser blasters. The shots cratered the stone around *Nuntio Dolores*' feet – a few hits scorched its greaves, but did no harm.

'Get around behind him,' Esha voxed Jehani, shouting over the discharge of her Titan's guns.

But Jehani Jehan ran away towards the corrie entrance, vanishing into the dark and the snow in the final betrayal of their friendship.

Cursor Ferro's signum marker winked out.

Esha faced Terent Harrtek alone. His engine stared at hers, pawing the ground like a beast. It radiated a sense of wrongness, engendering a sick animal fear that made her want to run. She felt it in her crew. They were tensed, ready to bolt. If they did, they would die.

Domine Ex Venari stared at *Nuntio Dolores*. Metal pinked as it cooled in the mountain storm.

'What are we going to do, Esha?' Yeha Yeha asked. 'Jehani's gone. We're alone. He's just waiting.'

'She wouldn't just leave us, not like that,' voxed Odani Jehan, refusing to believe her sister would abandon her and Jephenir.

'Well, she has!' shouted Yeha.

'He wants us to make the first move,' said Esha. 'He wants me to run.'

'Maybe we should,' voxed Nepha Nen from her station.

'Say that again and I'll shoot you myself,' Esha said, and meant it. 'A hunter never runs before her prey. Omega-6, get me as much power as you can. I'm going to need it all.'

'There will be one last beneficent act from the Machine-God,' the magos responded. *'I will ensure it.'*

Esha eased her hand off the manual throttle and flexed her stiff fingers. 'Yeha, lean over and give me widecast. All frequencies. Let's see if he talks.'

Yeha Yeha looked at her.

'Just do it!' Esha ordered. Yeha Yeha leaned over to the oratorius desk and

punched a sequence of buttons.

'There you are,' she said. 'I hope this works.'

Esha paused before depressing the voxcaster button, but when she spoke she did so firmly. 'Harrtek. Listen to me!' Esha voxed. 'We do not have to fight. We can both live. Remember that we were comrades. Remember that.'

'Is that it?' said Yeha Yeha.

'What else do I say? Apologise for lying to him?'

Interference crackled over the vox. It was a desperate gambit. If Harrtek had been in possession of all his faculties, then it might have worked, but he was not.

Nuntio Dolores howled with bestial belligerence. It lifted its face to the sky and roared.

'Cog and gear, what by Mars have they done to that engine?' said Yeha Yeha.

'Get me all weapons online, now,' Esha said.

Nuntio Dolores broke into a charge. It was so close, Esha was still bringing her weapons to bear when it crashed bodily into *Domine Ex Venari.* Its shoulders rammed into the czella, jarring the crew violently as the head snapped back against its neck cowl. One of the mandible pipes tore free as *Nuntio Dolores* pushed against the Reaver, inching it back towards the drop. As he pushed, Harrtek swiped clumsily, attempting to grip the smaller Titan with his power claw, but his hold came free, ripping off *Domine Ex Venari*'s left-hand lasblaster in the process. A second swipe crushed *Domine*'s void shield blisters, and they gave out with a spectacular burst of violet light.

The Reaver was rocked back by the greater power and weight of the Warlord. If Harrtek succeeded in having *Nuntio Dolores* seize *Domine Ex Venari,* then it was over. She needed to get him at range. Knowing she could not beat Harrtek hand to hand, Esha stepped back and around, turning the impetus of *Nuntio Dolores* against it, pitching it forwards. The larger Titan stumbled, stopping its trip from turning into a complete fall by grabbing at the mountain with its power claw. Harrtek was jammed against the rock at the point the corrie sheered off four hundred metres. Snow-whipped darkness lay before him, the mountains' lower reaches lit by the flashes of ongoing conflict.

Esha staggered aside. Alarms trilled from every quadrant. Superchilled gases vented into the cockpit from the machine's ruptured coolant system. The crew were shaken from their unity with the MIU and were speaking all at once, delivering verbal reports of imminent doom.

Esha let the systems notifications flow over her in that strange machine copy of pain a princeps shared with her engine. There was damage throughout. 'We

won't survive another charge like that. All power to volcano cannon!' Esha ordered. Mechanisms clunked inside the machine as power was shunted to the giant laser array. *Domine Ex Venari*'s right hip gyroscopes had been unseated, and Esha and Odani Jehan struggled to keep a constant lock on its enemy. The focal distance of the gun changed as it wavered about, the irises about the main crystalline array constantly shifting as the machine's spirits tried to get a steady lock.

She gritted her teeth and fired just as Harrtek was pushing himself off the rock. Bits of the Titan caught on the stone tore with the huge force it applied to stand.

'Missed!' Odani swore.

The volcano beam sliced into the cliff twenty metres to Harrtek's right. Molten rock dribbled down the cliff face. *Nuntio Dolores* stood upon the brink of the precipice and screamed towards the sky.

'By the Omnissiah,' Esha breathed. 'What have you done to yourself, Harrtek?'

This time, he replied.

'Esha, Esha,' said Harrtek. His voice was cracked, teetering on the edge of incoherent rage. *'Look upon my power. I am so glad you have seen it. It was fated that we meet again, don't you think? Now you will know the glory of Chaos before you die. Now you can see how weak your Legio is, how misguided in its loyalty to the False Emperor. Still you follow the tyrant of Terra. Look at what he denied us! Witness your mistake before you perish, my dear.'*

The lasblasters upon Harrtek's carapace swivelled down and locked on. Slowly, the Titan brought up its volcano cannon.

'Your friends have abandoned you. I never would. You could have become one of us, and together we could have raised my son to the heights of power. But you denied me. You denied him. You gave him to them, the scryers of oil and mumblers of knowledge. How I hated you for that.'

'Listen to me!' Esha said. 'I lied to you. I didn't want you to think about me or about the child. I wanted you out of my life. What your Legio did to Biphex I could never forgive.'

In her auspex senses, Esha saw a flicker in the Warlord's power flow. Harrtek paused.

'What do you mean?' Harrtek's voice was still strangled with rage, but a measure of the man he had been was evident in his words.

'I mean–' began Esha.

'She means you had no son, you misbegotten traitor scum.' Jehani Jehan's voice cut across the vox. *'You have a daughter, and she serves the Legio Solaria, the*

Emperor and Mars with pride.'

'Jehani!' said Jephenir.

'Where is she?' said Esha, who could still see no sign of the scout through the Titan's senses.

'All the little loyal daughters of the Emperor are here. Good, I can kill you all.' Harrtek pivoted to find her, too slow, too late.

Jehani's signum burst back into life. Across multiple machine sensors Esha witnessed the Warhound's reactor ramping suddenly up to full output.

'She's worked herself around the other side of Harrtek on low power!' said Yeha Yeha. 'She's coming in fast!'

The ground vibrated with *Cursor Ferro*'s rapid stride as it burst out of the swirling snowstorm, running directly at the traitor Warlord. Harrtek redirected his weapons towards the charging scout. Flickers of destruction burst past *Cursor Ferro* and the snapping bangs of displaced air echoed round the corrie. A triple hit from the lasblasters burst the small Titan's void fields, and it stumbled, but recovered, and ran full tilt into *Nuntio Dolores.*

The impetus of her charge rocked the Warlord back. They stood upon the edge of the precipice a moment, framed by fire-glow refracted through the snow and rain.

'Legio first,' said Jehani Jehan.

The Titans fell away into silence.

Domine Ex Venari took a faltering step towards the drop.

'Jehani,' Esha said. Alarms wailed all around her. Fire licked from shattered panels. Yeha Yeha had disconnected herself from the manifold, and was jetting fire suppressant over the damage, yelling at the others to help.

'Jehani Jehan, respond.'

There was no reply, and no time to mourn. A tremendous, world-ending rumble sounded across Beta-Garmon III.

The Carthega Telepathica was falling.

Domine Ex Venari swung around and looked up. A vast, molten bite had been taken out of the Diviner's Needle by the traitors' bombardment. The mountainsides echoed to the war-horns of the enemy as they beat a hasty retreat.

Domine Ex Venari had nowhere to go.

The astropathic temple swayed. The giant hawsers holding it steady creaked, sang a sawing whine, and parted. Cables whipped free. Like a felled tree, the needle turned away from its weakened point, and dropped.

‘Get us out of here! Now! Drop shields, decouple weapons. All power to locomotors!’

The Titan lurched into a run. The needle ripped itself up by the roots, demolishing the mountain. *Domine Ex Venari* made the entrance to the corrie as boulders the size of Land Raiders roared down from the heights, only to find the road down full of rocks flowing liquidly to the plains. The needle was toppling in the other direction to them, an endless line of rockcrete and plascrete descending from the heavens. As it fell, it bent, the indestructible destroyed by gravity’s violent pull. A rising pressure radiated from the top, pushing at the crews’ inner beings, the psychic screams of a thousand astropaths plummeting to their deaths.

Falling cables sliced into the mountain like garrottes into throats. They fell so fast and hard they glowed with heat, and their impacts set off more landslides.

Esha turned the Titan hard away from a falling hawser. Yeha Yeha was disconnected. Jephenir was insensible with shock at the death of her blood-sister. The burden of piloting the Titan was Esha’s alone. She felt effort crushing her. A headache was building like a wave, the kind that threatens apoplexy and death.

Domine Ex Venari turned straight onto the mountainside. The machine skidded and stumbled down the slope, slamming into outcrops to slow itself, each hit impairing its function more. The weight of the machine pulled at it, and in short order it was falling faster than it could run. A rush of pulverised stone flowed down the hillside, engulfing the Reaver’s ankles. The Titan tripped, and fell.

Esha activated the salvator protocols. Explosive bolts blew around the neck ring. Rockets fired, and *Domine Ex Venari*’s head flew free in a lofting arc as the Titan’s body crashed down hard. Odani Jehan, Nepha Nen, Omega-6 and Fenina Bol were left behind in the disintegrating machine. Limbs scattered down the mountainside, half swallowed by rushes of following stone. The carcass tumbled over three times, then came to a sliding halt.

The head, meanwhile, was in greater trouble. The engines were short burst, limited fuel, intended to carry the command crew clear of a reactor breach, nothing more. Firing from the side of the mountain, it flew further and faster than it should, descending with a cannonball’s parabola to certain destruction. It hit the ground four hundred metres down, bouncing, picking up speed, tumbling with no more control than the boulders racing down the mountain beside it. Esha’s world was a centrifuge whirl of screams and sharp pain. Her restraints saved her from immediate death as the head hurtled down the mountain, holding her in place and preventing her from being dashed to pieces on the sides of her

own cockpit. The czella came crashing down onto a boulder that acted like a ramp, bowling it high again and then, with one bone-crushing impact, *Domine Ex Venari'*s head came to rest.

Blackness swallowed Esha.

Esha knew she wasn't dead because she dreamed. She dreamed she saw the Warmaster himself. Full of daemonic majesty, he surveyed the field of battle in the drear light of day. His dread lieutenants surrounded him, men who had once been noble and wise, great heroes of the Imperium. That had left them. They were cruel warlords now, with no trace of kindness remaining, only the burning need for conquest and power.

They spoke words she could not hear over the ringing in her ears, but they gestured clearly enough, showing off the scene of triumph for the edification of their master. They showed him maps and pict captures of how very clever they had been. Horus waved them away. They showed him these things only to justify their continued existence, but he was the Warmaster. He did not need such crude aides to see the scope of his victory.

Fell lights were threading the clouds. The warp had broken through the veil of reality. Under this light, Horus seemed at home amid the destruction. Esha watched this disembodied, so it seemed, staring from above onto a burned-out gun platform on the second line, but she was convinced, should she move, that he would see her. She held her breath. She willed her heart to be still. Nothing in the universe could frighten her more than the thought of looking into those burning red eyes.

He didn't look at her. He turned to his lieutenants and raised a clawed hand. He began to speak.

A curious thing happened. As he spoke, his face creased. His hand went to his side. It came away covered in blood. A wide wound had opened in his armour where there had been no mark before. Beneath it the flesh parted like a smiling mouth, and vitae by the litre gushed from it.

The Warmaster fell.

Consternation exploded in the silent tableau. Guns were pointed. Some were fired. Less than half a minute passed before teleport light engulfed them all.

The Sons of Horus bore their father bleeding from the field.

More blackness.

Bright light ended it. It was shining straight in her eyes. She grimaced and shut them. She wanted to sleep.

‘She’s alive,’ said a voice she didn’t know.

‘Mother!’ said her daughter. ‘Mother! Can you hear me?’

Saws rasped metal. Weight pulled away from her chest, replaced with stabbing pain. Bigger lights blinded her.

‘Mother! Mother! Stay with us!’

‘She is gravely wounded,’ said the other voice.

‘The rest?’ said Abhani Lus.

‘Dead.’

‘Quickly. We’ve got minutes at best before the enemy find us here. Get her to the shuttle.’ A third voice. Also unknown. She felt she should know, but she did not. Her mind was full of holes. None was bigger than that left by *Domine Ex Venari.*

‘We are trying our best, princeps,’ said the third voice.

‘Then try harder!’

She was lifted out of her throne. Bones ground on bone. She screamed.

‘Careful!’

‘We have to be fast! Get her aboard.’

She was taken outside. The whine of idling plasma jets greeted her. Cold wind blew off the plains.

‘It’s not raining,’ she said.

‘She’s speaking!’ said Abhani Lus. ‘Mother!’ A warm hand rested on her arm. ‘What did you say?’

Esha’s head rolled to one side as they lifted her into the shuttle’s open hold. Before the doors were shut, she saw *Domine Ex Venari*’s battered czella resting upon a small cliff faced with plascrete, part of the roof sawn away. By chance the Titan’s augur lenses had come to rest pointing at a blasted gun platform a hundred metres below.

She recognised it. Her heart beat fast. She tried to sit. Her hand groped for her daughter’s arm.

‘What is it? What is it?’ said Abhani Lus.

The cold nozzle of a dispenser pressed into her neck.

‘My daughter!’ she managed to say before the drugs hissed into her bloodstream and took her away once more from the waking world. ‘Terra is saved! Horus has fallen!’

THIRTY-ONE

No Kind of Victory

Sanguinius stood upon the fractured walls of Nyrcon City. He stood against a backdrop of a hundred legionary banners, and a mountainous city ablaze from peak to base.

The hive burned from ten thousand places. Before the shattered bastions of the fortifications the broken bodies of hundreds of god-machines lay. They were so numerous they covered the ground, hiding the wind-scoured wasteland from sight. Leaking plasma reactors, still burning, sent out streamers of violently hued gases that changed colour as they cooled. Every now and then, an explosion issued from the battlefield as unfired munitions cooked off, or a reactor gave out completely, and in those cases there was also a flash of baleful false lightning that lit the dust and smoke from within. From Nyrcon City too came detonations close enough to the surface to be heard, wrenching notes of metal tearing, and the thunder of avalanches as spires and halls collapsed. Where the Anvil had struck the city's side, a vast hole, alight with the glow of molten metal, vented black smoke in endless amounts into the sky. It spread an oily cast across the world, blocking out the light from the sun, so it seemed that Nyrcon and its neighbours were trapped in a deep cave of smoke and flames.

There was danger where Sanguinius stood atop the ramparts. The whole of the western plain was rucked up in a fresh impact crater, wide as a sea. His advisory enginseers told him he must get away from there, lest the hive come down in its entirety and bury him under its weight. Not even he, they implored, could

survive that.

He sent them away.

‘I do not die here today,’ he told them.

He would not move, so nor did his men. His command cadre waited patiently, their red armour lit with orange highlights by the world of fire, while Sanguinius looked upon all he had done.

Handfuls of loyalist Titans stalked the scrap grounds, filling the heads of enemy machines that showed signs of life with sprays of bullets, or misericord-bursts of las-light. There were Blood Angels down there, around the Titans’ feet, hunting escaped crewmen, or offering aid to those loyal to the Throne where they were found. There were precious few among the Titan crews left alive. Mostly they hunted, executing with murderous efficiency every traitor they came across.

At the edge of the battlefield the salvaging of the god-engines’ remains was already under way. Adeptus Mechanicus crawlers were set down by mighty lifters. Giant, dome-backed machines sorted through the dead metal of once awesome engines of war, sifting scrap for what could be used again, a weapon here, a head there, a limb or armour plate. They crushed that which could not, sorted the materials internally, and poured them up long conveyor belts that stood proud of their sides into attendant foundry leviathans.

Tainted air burned his primarch’s throat as he watched the spectacle of the Cult Mechanicus’ automated funeral. The machines were impressive, but what touched his soul were the lesser processions that wended their way between the dead; long trains of robed priests bearing banners and wailing sad music went from engine to engine, loyalist and traitor, to offer final benedictions to their extinguished souls. Such misery they exhibited. Sanguinius felt it on the air, his psyker’s sensitivities leaving him open to it, and therefore he suffered a measure of what they suffered. The Great Angel was a noble being, and affected by the pains of others, even those of the Cult Mechanicus. Although they forswore humanity for the sake of the machine, their sorrow was all too human, for all their protestations of disdain for emotion and all things of the flesh.

‘I am become death, the destroyer of worlds,’ said Sanguinius softly.

‘My lord?’ said Raldoron. He was at the head of the Legion’s Chapter Masters. Other heroes of note waited there: the Sanguinary Guard Azkaellon and his comrade Amit, lord of the Flesh Tearers Chapter, wise M’Kani Kano of the Librarium, and others.

A new voice answered, rich and powerful as Sanguinius’, a primarch’s voice, heavily accented and beautiful with foreign poetry.

‘It is a line from a text of an ancient religion that said all things are one, First Captain. That there is no beginning and no end.’

‘Jaghatai. You came,’ said Sanguinius. It was a statement wearily delivered, without joy at reunion.

‘As soon as your request for aid was received. It appears I am too late.’

‘It is I who was in error. The failure of this campaign is my guilt to bear.’

‘You said yourself, it was never meant to be won.’

Jaghatai Khan walked through the throng of Blood Angels, followed by a company of his own elite, their white armour lit ruddy by the fires consuming the hive.

Sanguinius looked back upon the battlefield as his brother joined him.

‘The scriptures your father quotes from held that to each god in each of his many lives was given a part they were bound to play,’ said the Khan, continuing his explanation. ‘These ancient Kushites said there was no life and death, that both were illusory. All is cyclical and never-ending. Their creed was at once cataclysmic and comforting.’

‘It gives me no comfort,’ said Sanguinius. ‘I look upon destruction such as this, and I no longer wish to play my part. In light of this, I wonder what I am for.’

‘We are as we were made to be,’ said the Khan. He said this as a fact, something to be accepted, like poor weather.

‘I am no longer convinced of that,’ said Sanguinius. ‘If the Emperor had known what we would become, He would have ordered our destruction before we were ever taken from Him. You would think He would have known, when He gathered us to Him. Two failures should have made Him wary.’ He turned away from the battlefield and the dead machines, towards the wreck of Nyrcon City. ‘I have made of this place a pyre for hundreds of millions of innocents, and for what?’ He gestured to the fallen Titans and the giant rupture in the planet’s crust. ‘To reduce infinitesimally the forces the Warmaster will bring to Terra to kill our father? There was no worth in this place other than as a miserable dwelling, somewhere for generations to live and die in darkness and poverty before my father found the time to raise them up. Now it is not even that.’

‘I am sorry, lord,’ said Azkaellon, falling to one knee. The knuckles of his bionic arm rested in the rubble of the wall. ‘The Sons of Horus hid their intentions to the last. We had no warning they were going to destroy the Anvil.’

‘Rise, my son,’ said Sanguinius. ‘It is my error, not yours. Horus beat me without even setting eyes on me.’

‘You should not blame yourself, as Azkaellon should not,’ said the Khan.

Sanguinius fell silent. Firelight danced upon golden hair. Though clouds and smoke blotted out the sky, he could see the damage the fall of the Carthega had done. The pale non-light of the warp, visible to his psychic gifts, spread across the firmament. Although unheard by mortal ears, it let out a snarling howl that cut dead the messages of astrotelepathy. He, the Lion and Guilliman had destroyed the Ruinstorm, so Horus had found another way to create the same effect; it was lesser, but it was well placed to aid him. Despair gripped Sanguinius. Perhaps his death at Horus' hands would do no good, and the galaxy would burn.

'A thousand astropaths dead,' he said, 'the warp unleashed upon the Garmon Cluster, our communications destroyed and our forces fragmented beyond redemption.' He looked deep into his brother's eyes, who frowned to see the suffering in them. 'I am glad to see you, my brother, but I would fly a while, to witness all the good I have done here,' he said bitterly. He spread his wings and stepped towards the precipice of the ruined parapet.

His lords stood unsure of what to do. Sanguinius' humours grew ever darker.

'My lord,' called Amit. 'What are your orders, what should the Legion do?'

Sanguinius half turned his head. His feathers ruffled in the hot wind, poised upon the verge of flight. 'Send orders to all companies to regroup. Inform every Imperial force still contactable that they are to make all haste to the muster point. Our cause here is lost. This is no kind of victory.' Sanguinius looked to his brother. 'Jaghatai?'

'You were vouched this command, Great Angel. My sword is yours to direct. The Ordu are ready to ride at your direction.'

Sanguinius nodded slowly. His head was heavy with the burden, and it was a struggle to look up into the heavens, to the position the Throneworld occupied beyond the choking smog of war. He knew where it was instinctively.

'Then we return to Terra.'

He stepped off the wall. Slow wingbeats carried him into the sky, where the world spread itself beneath him, and displayed its utter ruination.

THIRTY-TWO

A New Darkness

The *Tantamon* was the last ship remaining to the Legio Solaria.

Three of its drop-ship slots were unoccupied. The hull of the conveyor itself bore extensive damage, and yet it was luckier than its sister ship. The *Artemisia* was dead upon the plains of Beta-Garmon III. Its landing craft were broken wrecks littering the mountain around the ruins of the Carthega Telepathica, brought down as it ferried engines from half a dozen Legios to the world.

The picture of the Legio's reduced status continued within. The *Tantamon*'s halls echoed to the rare footsteps of survivors. Every level of the Legio had suffered massive depletion: duluz, secutarii, skitarii, tech-priests, Knights and, most evidently, god-machines. Not a single drop-ship was full. One of the three was empty completely.

Abhani Lus Mohana walked the silent halls alone, heading for the drop-ship hastily reconsecrated to be fit for First Maniple, where the last of the Legio gathered. She joined a thin stream of people who spoke few words. Titan crew shocked with the death of so many sisters, tech-priests mumbling prayers for their dead machine charges, their red and white robes tied tight with black mourning bands.

They all walked so slowly. None of them had any energy remaining. The great aft war gates of the drop-ship reared up. They were scarred with battle damage, the orange paint scraped down to grey undercoat and dull, wounded plasteel. Sealant foam had been liberally applied around one side where the drop-ship hull

no longer formed a good seal with the *Tantamon*, all that was keeping the atmosphere in and the void out. Yellow candlelight shone from the circular access port bored through the left-hand gate. The procession filed through this in small knots, degrees of division between priest, crew, serfs and infantry forgotten. There were so few of them left now, Abhani Lus thought, they could not afford to dwell on rank.

She passed into the ship past parchments fluttering in the updraft of thousands of candles. The scene before her was even more reminiscent of a temple than the last time she had gone to see her grandmother.

The Legio was prepared for a funeral.

Her breath caught in her throat to see the shell of *Luxor Invictoria* pinned against the far wall by a thousand extremis-grade mag-hooks. Every limb was broken. Every plate cracked. And yet, the Titan lived. Under the watchful glare of *Sagitta Auri,* the last of First Maniple's myrmidons, tech-priests worked with feverish application to prevent their god-machine's passing. They took no rest. They wore out their servitors. Under their intensive care, *Luxor Invictoria* stabilised, and began the slow road to recovery.

His head was held in a separate cradle, at the height it would be were it still attached, as was respectful. Long bridging cables linked the head to the body, bringing together the two parts of his soul – Mohana Mankata Vi, and the machine-spirit that dwelled inside his body of iron.

'The Titan will walk again!' said a tech-priest Abhani Lus did not know, prompted by her sorrow. 'So will your grandmother. Rejoice! She joins with the machine.'

The procession walked on in silence. In front of and beneath the head cradle, a dais platform was held aloft upon a tall scissor lift. A staircase had been set up leading to the platform. Abhani Lus was among the privileged few allowed to ascend, with the other remaining crew and senior strategos.

Through the broken faceplate of the Titan, the Great Mother's immersion tank, cracked and blackened but still complete, was visible. Cables festooned it. Ugly squares of glassite paste patched it. But it functioned, and Mohana lived for now.

The last of her daughters came to pay their final respects. Abhani Lus realised that she would never speak with her grandmother again.

The Titan crews filled the platform in solemn silence. There were twenty-nine of them, of all grades, all that was left from a Legio of hundreds of women. Most bore the marks of the conflict for Beta-Garmon: scars, burns, amputated limbs. There had been little time to heal. They were neglected by the magi. So many of

the god-engines were in greater need. Many of the women exhibited signs of severance trauma, ripped from the MIU by catastrophic damage, or worse, still attached to the manifold when their Titans had died. Restless eyes, facial tics, tremors in the limbs as they relived the shock of engine death – none of them had escaped wounding, and they bore a combination of spiritual, mental, emotional and physical scars.

Abhani Lus was ushered to the front with great respect by Goten Mu. She was not the highest ranked princeps left alive, but she was the closest to the Great Mother as her last, natural granddaughter. Esha lay in an induced coma. The leadership of the Legio hung in the balance, but in this instance the order shed some of its military manners, acting more as a family.

Abhani Lus glanced from side to side, uncomfortable to be set at the head of so many heroes. With the crews were the highest tech-priests and Legio support staff. Their numbers were less reduced by the war, although only barely.

Sagitta Auri blew out a single, funereal note. All those ordained in the Cult Mechanicus began to sing a dirge, even the Vox Omni Machina and the Magos Principia Militaris, for this was an occasion of the most momentous misery.

Neokora and deimechanics worked together over desks cluttered with flashing valves. They struggled to raise the spirit of the Great Mother from her slow slide into death, but they persevered, and eventually the silhouette in the tank jerked, and her head rose. Through the scrappy blurts of damaged voxmitters, she spoke. Abhani Lus held her breath, so as not to miss a word.

'My daughters,' she said. 'My children.' Even broadcast by voxmitter, her voice was a thin whisper, quiet as a graveyard breeze, yet some power clung to it still. 'Children of my long-departed friends, last of the exiles of House Vi.'

Lights blinked in pulsing waves that ran across the equipment desks. Tech-priests twittered binharic at one another and their devices. The Great Mother spoke on over their agitation.

'We have survived this test. Through your skill and dedication, the name of the Legio Solaria will continue.' Her vox feed blared with sudden static, breaking up her words, though she did not notice and spoke on. '…ever more in defence of all we hold dear, but it will not be the same Legio. Our gene stocks are exhausted. New crews must be found. If the magi of Tigris return to Procon, which they most surely will, then the terms will be renegotiated with our ancestor houses. The Knights of Procon will not be deceived again. They covet the power of the god-machines for themselves. Men will come among us. This era of the Imperial Hunters is over.'

Tension rose between the surviving women and the tech-priests. The future depended on the cult leaders. None of the huntresses disagreed with the Great Mother's assessment. They felt the first cuts of the coming betrayal.

'The universe has changed, my daughters. Horus begins his final march for Terra. This is the end of the old, and the birth of the new. Now we can only survive. As your Grand Master, the Great Mother of this Legio, I have one final request.'

Her voice was fading, the electronic qualities growing, its humanity dying. Emotion bled away, not quite entirely gone, but her tones lost nuance so that all that was left in the end was the sincerity of her plea. It seemed to Abhani Lus that her grandmother addressed her directly, and maybe that was true.

'Live. Take forward the best of what we were, and bring it into the Legio that will bear our name. Remember honour. Remember speed. Remember cunning. Remember the hunter's kindness, to kill cleanly and swiftly, and to let prey live when it should, and cull mercilessly when it should not. Not. Not. Not. Not. I. I. I would not ask that you remember me. My time is done, but remember what we… what we… what we…'

Discordant roaring boomed from the voxmitters. The deimechanics fussed over their devices. The Great Mother's voice returned.

'Remember what we were, together. Remember always, Legio first.'

Her speech concluded abruptly with a musical tone of disconnection.

The deimechanics stood still. The hymns swelled. The Vox Omni Machina moved forward.

'She is dying. It is time for the Great Mother to become one with the machine. Begin deactivation.'

Far back in the drop-ship, the bell of remembrance tolled. Cast from the broken plates of the Legio's first Warlord lost in battle, its sonorous voice recalled all who had lost their lives in service to the Emperor's dream.

The Vox Omni Machina gestured solemnly to the deimechanics. They bowed deeply, their mechadendrites and additional augmetic limbs brushing the floor respectfully, then returned to their machines.

Abhani Lus let out a sob and dropped her head. Three tears fell to the platform floor, each one splashing into a little crown of misery on the metal.

A button press began the end of Mohana Mankata Vi's life.

There was wind upon her skin.

She was youthful again, and free of the tank and the infirmities of age. Her

steed Hamaj tensed between her legs, eager to surge forward into the landscape before them.

The dark forest lay behind. Ahead, there was nothing but golden grasses as far as the eye could see, the kind of landscape a rider could lose themselves in forever. Downy seeds brushed against skin warmed perfectly by the setting sun.

‘Come, Hamaj!’ she whispered.

The horse needed no encouragement, but sprang into a gallop straightaway, arrowing through the grasslands towards forever.

A heaven, of sorts. But it could not last. A diabolical laugh cut the sky, making it bleed. Grass wilted where the sound travelled. The earth shook. The wound in the sky spread its bloody lips, opening up on a vista of madness, an ocean of energy where monsters waited to devour her.

‘Stop!’ she commanded.

But Hamaj did not heed her, and plunged onwards. The ground shook and began to break into fragments. Soil frittered away into multi-coloured vapour. Grass launched itself at the growing rift like arrows loosed. An invisible force pulled at her soul, dragging her towards the waiting maelstrom of sharp eyes and teeth. Hamaj whinnied in panic and fell into the yawning nothingness. The last parts of the prairie vision evaporated, leaving her alone.

Otherworldly predators circled, ready to tear her to shreds.

Mohana Mankata Vi screamed.

This was the reality of the warp. This was what the Imperial Truth hid. At the last moment, she felt utterly betrayed, and understood finally why the traitors had turned.

Wide-winged things with rasping mouths dived at her through looping whirls of impossible colours. She floated helplessly. Through will alone she shifted herself aside from a swooping beast. Its razored fins caught her, and her soul’s arm bled light.

The creatures turned, excited by the scent of corposant upon the empyrean’s current, and dived.

She closed her eyes, wishing it all to be over.

A great song played. The loudest war-horn she had ever heard blasted across the non-space of the warp, and foundry heat beat at her back. She opened her eyes to find herself surrounded by a golden light, and the creatures fled before it.

Trembling, she turned.

A vast being filled eternity. She had the impression of a human form, though the entity was too large for a mortal eye to encompass. Its blood and bones were

grinding cogs, its thoughts living streams of plasma, its eyes lenses the size of galaxies.

An iron door appeared in the maze of machinery in front of her. She looked up, searching for a face, and saw a shining entity looking back down that turned from flesh to light to mechanism and back.

Through the door radiated the familiar, plasmic warmth of *Luxor Invictoria*'s reactor. She sensed its machine soul, more apparent to her now, not almost alive but truly living by the grace of her Machine-God.

A voice spoke within her, beautiful as the finest singer, grating as the mightiest machine.

While there is service, there is life, it said. ***It is time.***

Mohana Mankata Vi passed through the portal, where for one last, ultimate time, she joined with the spirit of the Titan.

Mohana Mankata Vi was played out by the eerie, monotone screech of monitoring equipment no longer detecting signs of life. Her corpse floated upwards in the amnion, arms wide, the cables that had sustained her wrapping around her back in a final embrace.

'She is gone,' said the Magos Principia Militaris.

'She will be with us forever,' said the Vox Omni Machina.

In the body of the great god-engine clamped against the wall, the erratic, wounded frequency of the reactor steadied, and became a little smoother.

The site of the Diviner's Needle was abandoned by the bulk of the Warmaster's armies as soon as it had been destroyed. Their task was done, and they had no need to linger. They crucified the survivors of the Imperial forces as a warning to any who would defy the new Emperor of Mankind, then departed for new fields of war.

No one and nothing was left but acolytes of the Dark Mechanicum picking over the battlefield. They worked under glowering clouds whose interiors flashed with unnatural lightning. Above the weather fronts, a slick of diseased luminance crept across the firmament as the warp bled through the rift created by the tower's destruction.

Like their counterparts on Beta-Garmon II, the Dark Mechanicum laboured to retrieve the broken idols of their mechanical god and return them to good function. They did not follow the precepts of Horus, who in his dash for victory would leave his troops to die once they had served their purpose. The engines were far too precious for that, and upon this battlefield in particular there were

eight prizes beyond compare, gods of battle of the most potent kind.

The servants of machines passed over the wreckage of the Carthega with augurs and other, stranger devices of detection. Pulses of etheric energy harnessed by forbidden mechanisms emitted a call to the children of the warp for them to reveal themselves.

The needle lay draped over the planet's surface. Its impact was so great it had reshaped the land around it, giving the downed structure an illusion of softness, like it was a thing of cloth cast carelessly aside. Its ruin was visible from orbit. Nothing beneath this nation-sized megalith could have survived, and nothing did. The recovery machines of the Dark Mechanicum detected three of their treasures smashed beyond repair under the rubble, the daemon souls chained inside gone back into the warp. Not far from the ruin, a fourth was an inert statue, burned out from the inside.

'Search! Search!' commanded Ardim Protos as each disappointment was revealed, fearing all eight of his abominable children would be found dead. 'The final act was performed here! Find one alive, and the keys to power shall belong to us!' He powered his grav impellers to maximum. Their motors drew energy from the warp, and he flew about the battlefield, berating his acolytes to greater effort wherever he passed.

A fifth engine was found under a slope of rockcrete rubble. It was intact, and the mechanisms were functional. Protos' spirits rose, but a few minutes of testing told them the being imprisoned within had escaped, tearing out the souls of its crew as it passed from the materium into the empyrean, and leaving them as husks.

The day turned to night. The caustic rains returned, washing the land into a quagmire as slick as potter's slip. The water was black now with atmospheric debris, and more poisonous than ever before. Progress slowed. Day returned. Morning passed, then noon, a slight shifting of Beta-Garmon's feeble sunlight through the clouds of smoke showing the passage of time. Deluges came and went, leaving the metal of the Mechanicum's vehicles pitted by powerful corrosives.

Then, something. By the western flank of the mountain, near the crater made by the uprooting of the Carthega's foundations, an unnatural heartbeat was found.

Green and yellow lightning crawled across the sky with unnatural slowness. Protos made with all speed to the new site, and hovered over the heads of his servitors and priests.

'Yes!' he said. 'Yes! Here, dig! Dig!'

Attention was diverted to the intermingled mound of rock and ’crete.

Something stirred beneath.

Terent Harrtek walked bloody fields of battle that stretched into infinity. Red-skinned horrors made eternal war upon one another, commanded by giant generals wielding whip and axe. He fought with them, striking against anything that came within his reach. At times he was a man, at others a ghost raging impotently above the throng. Sometimes, he was with one of the greater entities, inside its mind, looking out through its eyes as it lashed its whip and slew foes by the thousand.

To awake to the taste of blood was no surprise.

He came to, still within his throne. Everything was black; he could see nothing. His heart thundered loudly in his chest and the room smelled of spilt gore. Blood caked his face from a gash across his forehead. The mind impulse unit was still in place in the port at the back of his skull, but he could make no connection to the soul of his machine.

‘Moderati,’ he said. His voice was hoarse, barely a whisper. He tried to move his hands to activate the manual vox switch, but could not. He suspected a broken back, though the lack of pain suggested neural feedback damage from the Titan was more likely. Neither concerned him. Both could be treated, and would be, for he was a princeps of a Warlord Titan, and a lord among men.

For a long time he sat there, unable to move. He was buried alive.

‘Trapped in a dead Titan, all my crew slain. So much for your promises of power, Ardim Protos,’ he said. His tongue was sore and thick, but his arrogance remained.

Time passed. He slept. The anger he had felt these past few months was absent. Strangely, he felt at peace.

He came awake to the scrape of stone on stone. Engine noise sounded high above. He looked up, but still he saw nothing.

‘About time,’ he said. He refrained from shouting, though he wished to. Rationally, he knew nobody could hear him. He must only be patient, and then he would be free.

The noise of drills and mechanical shovels came nearer, and his spirits rose. Soon, there was hammering on metal. There were people outside, coming for him. He grinned. His service to the Legio would continue. The Titan might even be salvaged. His war was not over yet. Perhaps he might even find this daughter of his, and teach her a lesson in violence.

The sounds retreated. He waited for his rescuers to come in through the back of the machine, or cut into the head. They would know he was alive, surely? Even the most basic of bio-augurs would pick up his heartbeat, or his mental activity.

Cold fear gripped his heart. They weren't coming.

There was a shift. The machine was moving! They were digging it out. He laughed at his own foolishness. It took him a moment to realise that the Titan was not being moved.

It was moving itself.

A deep, throaty growl sounded behind him, so close that it could have come from behind his head. He craned his neck around towards the czella door, but saw nothing in the dark.

The machine lurched again. Metal screeched on stone. The head jerked, throwing Harrtek's head forwards, and he feared further nerve damage. A rushing booming started up, like the thunder of a monstrous heart.

He could hear the reactor. All the lights were off. No device functioned.

'This is impossible,' he said.

The machine heaved. He recognised the motion as readily as if it were his own. It was trying to stand, pushing against something heavy. It moved again, then again, each movement more violent, flinging its head, sending Harrtek's own head whipping back and forth. The carapace banged on something, and again there was that terrible growl.

The Titan lunged. Metal screeched. The growl turned into a roar. Slowly, with great effort, it rose.

Rubble fell from its shoulders, banging loudly off the head. It lifted its face from the dirt, and the debris fell from the machine's eyes, uncovering the small window set behind the augur lenses. Pale light flooded in, allowing Harrtek to see.

His body was encased in a shell of ridged bone. The czella had transformed into a semi-organic abomination. Veined membranes covered the equipment and thick liquid oozed from everything. Fat arteries pulsed over instrument boards. The forward display was embedded in a film of flesh that looked to him very much like a retina, veined and iridescent. The clear images it had shown were replaced by watery reflections. The Titan was looking across the landscape. Members of the Mechanicum prostrated themselves at its feet. It looked down at its mangled limbs.

The armour plates were flowing like melted wax, changing shape. Skull runes rose into them like corpses surfacing from the sea. Elsewhere the machinery

cracked like the shell of a moulting crustacean. The volcano cannon lengthened, sprouting a moist mouth that clacked arm-long fangs against metal. The fingers of the arioch power claw split wetly, talons emerging from ceramite that became bony, then soft, turning into whipping tentacles that dripped with potent acid. A tail of raw, exposed bone forced itself from the rear pelvic assembly, growing a blade of horn from the tip.

Harrtek watched with horror. When the head changed, he began to weep. The organic mess of it pushed inwards. The back lengthened, the front shook, bent aside, and stretched outwards. Through the last vestiges of the MIU, Harrtek felt the change from noble armoured helmet to leering, semi-metallic machine-face sporting swept-back horns.

He thrashed against the bony cage holding him in place, but it would not let him go. His MIU cable mutated from banded metal to long, tubular organ that pulsed and sucked at his mind and soul. Each attempt to free himself prompted bony needles to force themselves into his flesh, pinning him in a state of permanent, immobile agony. He tried then to push his way into the MIU, but he had no influence over the being that inhabited his Titan. He could see it, but it spared him no attention.

He was trapped in the skull of the beast.

When eyelids blinked over the augurs and oculus, his mind cracked.

Terent Harrtek screamed unashamedly, every vestige of military control rinsed out of him in an instant and replaced by howling insanity, as the newborn Chaos Titan raised its head to the sky and roared out its hatred of the universe.

THIRTY-THREE

Malcador's Message

A river's gurgling symphony played over the garden. Thick rhododendrons hosted clouds of blooms. Malcador's retreat was in equal parts lie, memory and hope. It was a memory because it presented a version of Terra that no longer existed: lush, wet, verdant and teeming with life. It was a lie because it pretended things were still this way beyond the confines of the small valley it occupied; a small sun shone in the air, concealing the hard, rockcrete underbelly of the Imperial Palace. It was a hope that Terra might again be this way, and the sky might one day be open.

All three of those things were under threat. Malcador supposed that now, even if the Emperor were to win, Terra could never be rejuvenated the way He and Malcador had intended. The Imperium as it could have been was already dead.

The garden and a handful of similar places were Malcador's sole indulgence, and that place was his favourite. As he could block out the ceiling roofing over the valley, and the pumping station at the foot of the river that moved the water up the hill to flow back down again, he could shut out the war. There was peace in the garden; he enjoyed it for that. It was one of the few locations in all the galaxy where that claim could be made with any truth. It would not be the case for much longer.

The enemy were on their way.

Malcador's powerful mind received and interpreted Sanguinius' message hours before the astropaths did the same, and the parchment bearing fell tidings had

been brought by solemn Astra Telepathica agents to his garden. It mattered only to him that he knew before he had been informed. He felt a little guilty about not acting immediately, but the pretence of not knowing bought him a few hours to sit in quiet and think.

The Emperor would know, of course. The Emperor would have seen and understood what His angelic son had to say before he had said it. The Emperor would forgive Malcador a small, white lie to himself – a last indulgence to them both.

Malcador smoothed out the scrip of paper again, though it was already creaseless and flat, and read it one more time. Once it had been distilled from the cloud of conflicted imagery sent by the astropaths, the message from Beta-Garmon was very short. The anguish of the primarch Sanguinius was imprinted upon it. Within the body of the sending itself, his pain was even greater and more affecting, a rare moment of psychic resonance strong enough to touch the soul of the galaxy.

Malcador looked up at the soft yellow sun, an echo of a younger Sol that was itself memory, lie and hope. 'The gates are broken. The way to Terra is clear,' he said into the gentle light. 'The end game comes at last, my lord, after so long.'

Malcador closed his eyes and bowed his head. It had been such a long and punishing journey, he thought he might never see the end of it. His body ached with age, but his heart ached more. He was not meant to be, and yet he was: aged beyond the span of mortals, apart from his kind, the last fragment of an ancient power, the last of the Sigillites.

His eyes screwed tight with the knowledge of what was to come, but remained dry. He had no tears for himself. Humanity must survive no matter the cost. Through his brief meditation he drew strength into himself. There was no time for self-pity.

With a weary sigh, Malcador stood from the marble table where he had hosted so many of his infamous interviews. High lords and the primarchs themselves had sat there under his inscrutable gaze, daring to guess what lay behind Malcador's smile. So many times he had been there, too many to count. This was the last time, he knew. That saddened him more than he expected, and he took one last look around his sanctuary, allowing himself a few extra seconds of pleasurable melancholy before he took up his staff of office, and headed for the winding stone steps that led up beside the river, through a metal door and into the Imperial Palace.

As Malcador walked past the river's rush, he reached out to his subordinates,

the lords of mankind's crumbling empire, heroes and demigods all, and every one beholden to him. His message was sent by thought alone. Malcador had no need of vox or other means of communication. If he wished a thing be known, then it was known.

Simultaneously his mind touched a dozen others, halting them in mid action, mid sentence, mid thought. He repeated what he had discerned from the warp and had read from the paper. Simple, direct, and, now the moment was upon them, terrifying.

'Horus is coming,' he thought. And the thoughts of the greatest men and women in the Imperium were his thoughts, and they shared his consternation.

Malcador reached the garden portal. It opened silently and let him out. When he left the garden the river ran on. The false sun shone. They would do so, forgotten for centuries, until the power ran out, the water dried, and the plants and insects died. Another small piece of humanity's dream lost to treachery, it would become a dusty corner to add to all the other abandoned works of mankind.

Far above, in the palace that smothered a mountain range, bells began to toll.

The beginning of the end was upon them all.

AFTERWORD

The book that you hold in your hands very nearly didn't happen.

Let's go back in time, not far. A few years, that's all. It's about 2015 or so. The Horus Heresy was due to enter its final phases. The walls of the Imperial Palace were looming upon the horizon. Legions of loyal readers eagerly awaited the attack on Terra. A decree came down from on high that it was time to give it to them.

Beta-Garmon is an important waypoint on that road. Only it wasn't supposed to happen in this book, and so it almost didn't happen at all.

The first time I'd heard the phrase 'The Great Slaughter at Beta-Garmon' was back when I was first pencilled in to write *Wolfsbane*. 'What's that?' I said in all innocence. 'It's what happens in your book, Guy!' John French replied to me, sotto voce. An embarrassing moment only outdone by the time I suggested Lion El'Jonson was present at the final battle for the Imperial Palace to a packed seminar. Ahem. Moving on.

But as it turned out the climactic battle of *Wolfsbane* did not take place during this pivotal conflict. Mere days before I commenced writing, the histories of the future were consulted and it was decided that actually, Russ' fight must have taken place before Horus made his move, otherwise stuff did not make sense. So it proved, with the brothers' duel occurring at the little known system of Trisolian instead, immediately prior to the Beta-Garmon campaign.

Unfortunately, there was no room for another book. In the desire to bring about

the conclusion to the saga of Horus' betrayal, the small matter of Beta-Garmon was put to one side, an unfortunate casualty of scheduling as much as of war.

Time moved on. Things changed. In due course it was decided that, perhaps, the conflict of Beta-Garmon should be detailed after all. Beta-Garmon is the fight that flings open the doors to Terra. Had Horus lost there, then the Emperor might never have fallen, and the galaxy would be a different place. The Great Muster. The Titandeath. The Great Slaughter. The Sea of Fire. These are names that resonate throughout the background. They had to be covered, surely? Yes!

Only, now the end was even nearer. Black Library's publication plans were already set. A space had to be found.

A tight space.

That's when I got the call.

I think it's fair to say, and not too egotistically, that I have a reputation for writing quickly. Imagine the Black Library authors as very feeble primarchs, each with their own suite of modest gifts. I'm like a really rubbish Leman Russ. When there's a tricky job that needs doing fast, I'm first into the drop pod. Come on! I do have a Viking wife and a very big dog, okay? However much you believe that, I get the call quite often.

By the time it came to pen *Titandeath* it was 2018, and I'd become much more expert on the Horus Heresy than I once was. Even so, the thrill of excitement of writing a Horus Heresy novel is outdone by the watery fear that you'll mess it all up, and I had limited time to act, so as usual I set to reading.

At the same time, work on the Adeptus Titanicus game was well underway. The game is set during the Horus Heresy, and naturally one of the largest theatres of war is the one covered by this novel. Working with Andy Hoare and his compatriot Owen Barnes, the writers of the game, was one of the great pleasures of *Titandeath*. My career began working in small teams of creative people, and I miss being able to bounce ideas and concepts back and forth. That was immensely satisfying – thank you, chaps, and I mean it.

Beta-Garmon had grown somewhat since its first mention in the lore. For the longest time, it was assumed that Beta-Garmon was a single world, whereas it is in fact a cluster of inhabited planets spread across a subsector of its own: a pocket empire that survived the terrors of Old Night and came into the Imperium gratefully. The scope of the fight there is truly epic; it is not a single battle, or even a campaign, but a war in its own right that runs right the way through the Horus Heresy.

It became pretty obvious pretty quickly that we couldn't cover every aspect of

this warzone in a single novel. Therefore, I decided to write about Titans. In fact, I cockily suggested I'd write the definitive Horus Heresy Titan book. The Imperial Hunters and the Death Stalkers were given to me to work with. Granted access to awesome artwork, notes and incomplete previews of the game (I do love this job!), I set to work filling in the blanks.

One of the biggest decisions I took was to make the Heresy-era Imperial Hunters entirely female. The Horus Heresy, being a war of Space Marines, is naturally skewed towards the male perspective. When we do meet female characters they are mostly individuals surrounded by men. I wished to avoid that and try something a bit different. I could bang on about the inherent narrative tensions of female characters negotiating male power structures, but suffice it to say, having female characters with real power was great to write about in the setting, and you don't get more powerful in Warhammer 40,000 than the Grand Master of a Titan Legio.

Another item on my list of things to cover was Chaos Titans. These don't appear until after Beta-Garmon. Andy and I decided that the one that appears in my short story 'The Laurels of Defiance' was an early example, unique even, so I thought it would be very exciting to look into the origins of those that were at Terra, and the Mechanicum adepts responsible for their creation. A literal birth, you might say, for a scourge that still afflicts the galaxy.

I might write quickly, but I write too much. As is my way, I've run out of space. Again. I'll sign off by saying, for those of you who have been with the series since the beginning, rest assured, this book is one of the very last before the siege commences. The gates to Terra have been forced. The end draws near.

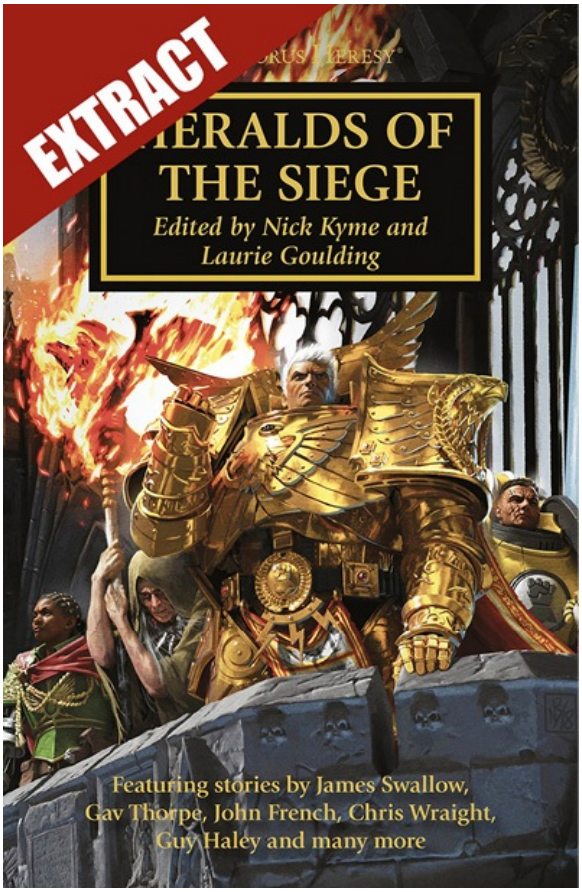
Now I must go, because I've just had another call…

Guy Haley
Yorkshire, 2018

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Guy Haley is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *Wolfsbane* and *Pharos*, the Primarchs novels *Corax: Lord of Shadows, Perturabo: The Hammer of Olympia*, and the Warhammer 40,000 novels *Dark Imperium, Dark Imperium: Plague War, The Devastation of Baal, Dante, Baneblade, Shadowsword, Valedor* and *Death of Integrity*. He has also written *Throneworld* and *The Beheading* for The Beast Arises series. His enthusiasm for all things greenskin has led him to pen the eponymous Warhammer novel *Skarsnik*, as well as the End Times novel *The Rise of the Horned Rat*. He has also written stories set in the Age of Sigmar, included in *War Storm, Ghal Maraz* and *Call of Archaon*. He lives in Yorkshire with his wife and son.

An extract from *Heralds of the Siege*.



The Martian soil trembled. Beneath the Temple-Tarantyne assembly yards, something was rising.

Once a glorious spectacle of magna-machinery and Titan production, the southern installation had produced the mighty god-machines of the Legio Excruciata. Now its great production temples glowed with the unholy light of corruption. Chittering constructs went to work on towering perversions – looming monstrosities that should have been Warlord Titans but instead were metal monsters of daemonic infestation and heretek weaponry.

Row upon row of such beasts stood silent in the storage precincts, waiting for the orbital mass conveyers that would take them to bulk freighters destined for the Warmaster's forces.

But those mass conveyors would not come.

With the Forge World Principal blockaded by the VII Legion, nothing was leaving Mars. Like the monstrous tanks, fevered warrior-constructs and ranks of empty battleplate sitting in storage bays across the surface, the Chaos Titans gathered Martian dust.

Dust that now rained down about the towering abominations as the bedrock quaked beneath them.

A Warlord Titan was a walking fortress of thick plate and powerful shielding. As any who had ever faced such an apocalyptic foe understood, it had few weaknesses. As a former princeps of the Collegia Titanica, Kallistra Lennox had the distinction of both piloting and felling such god-machines. She knew that one of the few vulnerabilities the Mars Alpha-pattern Warlord had was a weak point on its command deck, but the deck was almost impossible to reach for ground troops.

Standing in the gyroscopic interior compartment of the Mole burrowing transport *Archimedex*, Lennox felt the adamantium prow drilling a phase-fielded tunnel through the Martian bedrock and soil, then finally breaking the surface into the assembly yards. While the large tunnelling vehicle emerged upright, like a rising tower, the crowded troop compartment maintained its rolling orientation

within, which would make disembarkation a smooth affair. The princeps had directed the translithope to rise up next to a Warlord Titan identified as *Ajax Abominata*. Loyal constructs had been watching the installation for weeks from the scrap-littered sides of the surrounding mountains. The construction of *Ajax Abominata* was all but complete, although its armoured shell was still covered in a scaffold, complete with mobile gantries.

It was a target ripe for sabotage – and the princeps knew exactly how to do it.

Not that she looked very much like an officer of the Collegia Titanica any more. While she still wore her uniform amid scraps of flak and carapace, it was tattered and stained with oil. The black leather of her boots was scuffed and her gloves crudely cut to fingerlessness. She wore an eyepatch where her ocular bionic had been torn out, and a short chainblade sat heavy upon her belt where a ceremonial sabre used to hang. Grenades and hydrogen flasks dangled from a bandolier while in her hands the princeps clutched the chunky shape of a plasma caliver.

'Stand by,' she said, sternly.

The loyalist Mechanicum cell to which Lennox belonged had been dubbed the Omnissian Faithful. Like all its adherents, Lennox was a Martian survivor. Left behind in the exodus to Terra, she had become a rebel on her own world. While the scrapcode tore through the Forge World Principal, corrupting everything it touched, there had been some Martians and constructs who had followed their instincts. As part of a disgust response – like a person making themselves sick after ingesting a toxin or poison – some true servants of the Omnissiah had had the strength to mutilate themselves. They tore bionics from their bodies, severed hardlinks and burned out wireless receivers. Ports and interfaces were gouged out, their bodies and minds cut off from the code-streams of the Martian networks. They had saved themselves from the infected data that brought madness, spiritual pollution and the warping of flesh and form.

It was a corruption that had claimed nearly all who had not escaped the Red Planet, even the Fabricator General himself: Kelbor-Hal, now no more than a withered bundle of polluted workings. Like the magi below him and the constructs below them, he had become a slave to darkness. A puppet controlled by the renegade Warmaster Horus, light years distant.

In the Mole's troop compartment stood a motley collection of blank-faced adepts, battle-smashed skitarii, liberated tech-thralls, indentured menials, gun-servitors saved by their masters, vat-engineered work-hulks, harnessed ferals and bastardised battle-automata. All were pledged to the Omnissian Faithful but had

needed a leader in the field. Someone of a tactical mind and destructive disposition to help the rebels in a campaign of sabotage and subversion.

When Lennox had joined them, they had found just such a leader.

'Ten seconds,' the princeps told the rebel constructs about her. Her seconds, Omnek-70 and Galahax Zarco, waited either side of the bulkhead. Omnek-70 was skitarii – a Ranger who carried the length of a transuranic arquebus. Zarco, meanwhile, was a hulking enginseer who hefted a power axe in the shape of an Omnissian cog. Lennox listened for the sound of the drill and phase fields on different materials. She stamped on the deck.

'Ratchek,' she called to her former moderatii and the Mole's goggled operator. 'Kill the main drive. Open outer doors.'

The layered bulkheads sighed hydraulically, and slipped aside to reveal the shadowy interior of the scaffold complex.

Lennox nodded. 'Go.'

The structure was swarming with afflicted constructs going about their duties, and before long Lennox and her rebels found themselves fighting up through the blind spots and gauntlets of the scaffold interior. Meanwhile, heavily armed security forces – drawn from their perimeter posts by the Mole's emergence – were running across the assembly yards and converging upon the Titan.

The compartments and ladderwells of the towering complex were filled with the cacophony of gunfire. The Omnissian Faithful had to make use of whatever untainted weaponry they could scavenge and could not afford god-pleasing uniformity. Laslocks blasted bolts across the darkness of the decks. Shells from stub-carbines tore up through catwalks. Arc rifles threw streams of lightning along gantries. Lennox anticipated the arrival of the rebels by tearing grenades from her bandolier and throwing them up through the ladderwells and into the levels above.

Ajax Abominata, even in the final stages of its dread assembly, was what she had come to expect from a corrupted god-machine, swarming with twisted artisans prattling scrapcode and insanity.

The rebels moved up at speed and with merciless gunfire delivered at point-blank range. The corrupted army of constructs tending the monstrous Titan were ill-equipped to repel such a direct attack. The assembly yard's security forces and shock troops hadn't entertained the possibility of an assault on Temple-Tarantyne coming up through the installation's foundations. While they babbled and ran towards the towering scaffold, Lennox and her rebels hauled themselves

up through the structure. Heavy servitors and cyborg corruptions shrieked as they were blasted aside. Chainblades opened up the traitor constructs in fountains of blood and oil before sending them flailing off the scaffold's edge.

The rapid advance was not met without resistance. About them the very metal of the Titan's outer hull and the surrounding scaffolding warped with daemonic presence. Infernal eyes opened in the walls. Hatches opened explosively to vomit acidic ichor or shoot grasping tentacles at the rebels. Deck openings became fang-lined mouths that cut insurgents in half. The fighting got close and tangled on a platform crowded with strapped-down stores and cargo nets. They were rushed by servitors with black filth bubbling from their mouth-grilles and a fell light behind their eyes. Lennox ordered her expendable ferals with their limb-fused weaponry into the fray, supported by engineered hulks who tore the traitor servitors limb from corrupted limb.

Higher up, the rebels became caught in a furious exchange of fire as a twisted member of the Titan crew took charge on the scaffold deck, joined by sentries running up the mobile gantries. The stairwell turned into a horrific kill-zone. Lennox didn't have time or bodies to spare in pushing on through and so cut up through the mesh flooring with her chainblade. Sending a small group up through the hole with Galahax Zarco, she watched the enginseer swing his power axe about him. With heavy footfalls he took apart possessed servitors and buried the crackling weapon in the Titan crewmember with a sickening thud. With the gauntlet broken, Lennox ordered the rebels onwards and upwards.

The compartments about the Titan's command deck had been locked off by the time the rebels reached it. Engineering constructs gargled corruption at them through the metal.

'We don't have time for this,' Lennox said to Omnek-70 and Zarco. Levelling his arquebus at the doors, Omnek-70 punched round after transuranic round through the bulkhead and into the cavity compartment beyond. As the sound of the tainted constructs died away, the enginseer buried the crackling cog of his axe in one of the round-punctured doors and heaved it aside. Lennox slipped through, her plasma caliver hugged in at her chest.

The compartment stank of corruption and was wreathed in a lead-coloured smoke. There were warped bodies on the floor with gaping holes through their polluted workings where Omnek-70 had shot them through. A tech-adept came at the princeps, wielding a heavy multi-tool like a club. Leaning into the kick of the caliver, she blasted the thing into oblivion, before turning to face another filth-spewing construct, burning it from existence.

‘Open it up,’ Lennox said to Galahax Zarco as they strode through the compartment and climbed up onto the outer shell of the Titan’s head. From there they could see many other Titans in the gloom of the colossal assembly yard. They were all in different stages of completion, some surrounded by warped scaffolding. Lennox looked down at the corrupted hull of *Ajax Abominata* beneath her boots. The princeps could feel the suffering of the afflicted machine-spirit within.

‘Princeps,’ Omnek-70 called from the scaffold exterior, his optics whirring through different filters. He pointed out across the assembly yard. ‘The *Ventorum* is powering up.’

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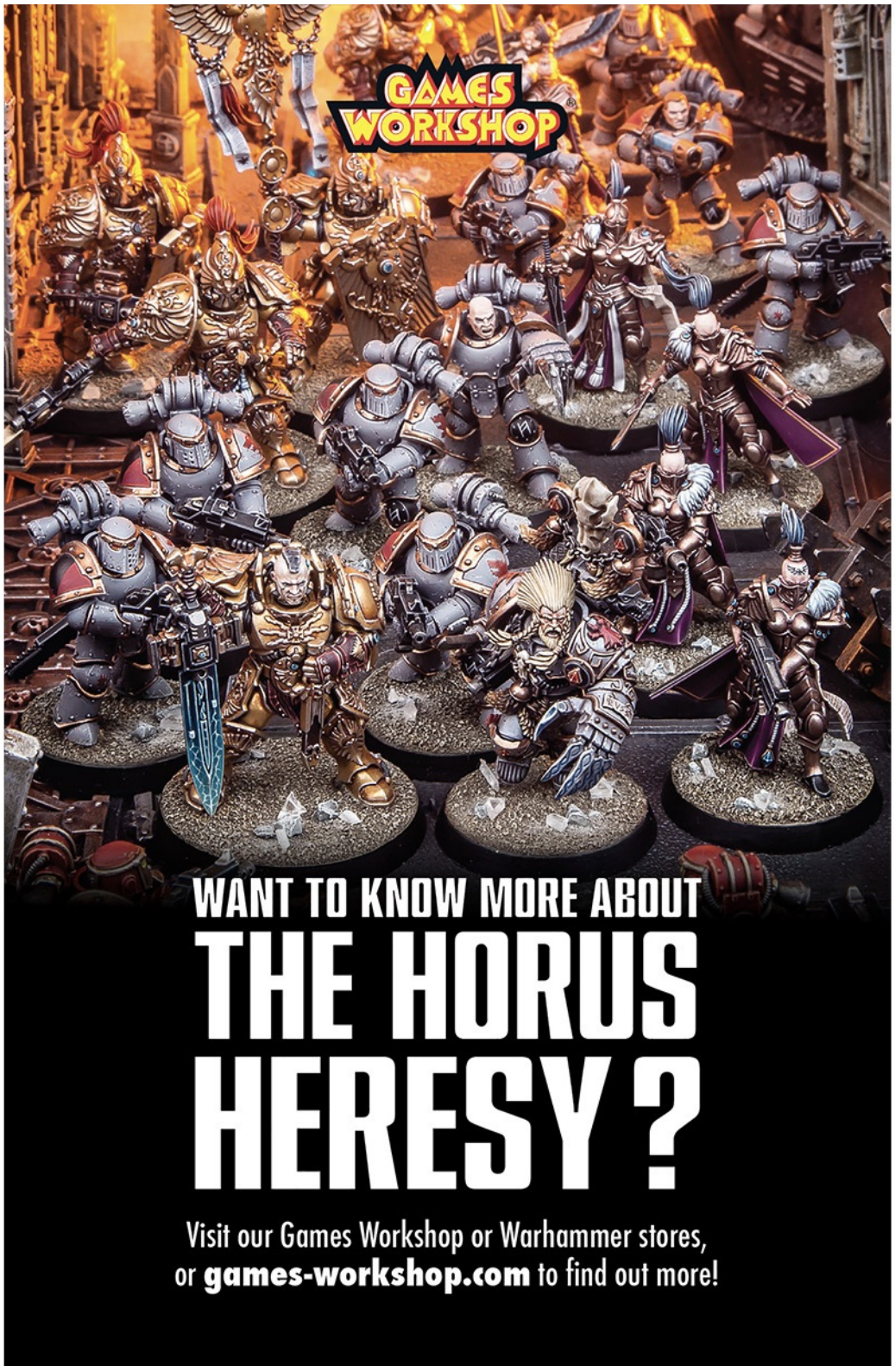
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